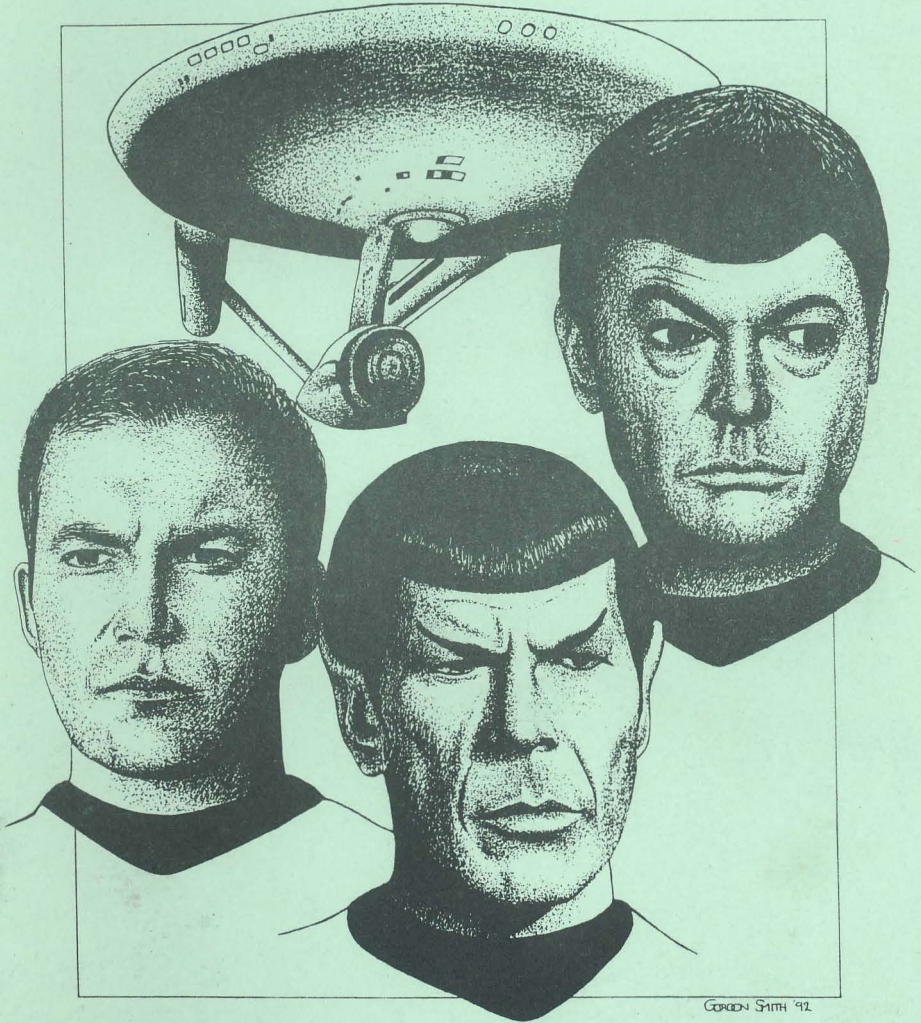


SODDE'S GAMBIT



GORDON SMITH '92

a Star Trek fanzine

by Brenda Kelsey

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Cover by Gordon Smith

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Editor - Valerie Piacentini

Typing - Brenda Kelsey

Proofreading - Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark & Valerie Piacentini

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Sheila Clark

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

SODDE'S GAMBIT

by

Brenda Kelsey

This story is dedicated to Joanne Osborne, who probably won't ever read it, and to Sue Jones, who already has!

Way back in 1984 I wrote a story called 50 Ways, and ScotPress published it! Sodde's Gambit is really part two of that story, and although it does stand alone, the following summary of the plot of 50 Ways will help to set the scene.

Seven months after the V'ger incident Leonard McCoy realises that Spock has started to show the initial signs of Pon Farr. Because he'd known what to look for, McCoy has been able to warn Spock well in advance of the later, mindless stages of the mating fever. Spock has contacted his Family on Vulcan and has asked for a mate to be found for him. T'Pau informs him that only one woman, T'Prilia, is willing to be his wife. She has set certain conditions: that Spock resigns from Starfleet and lives on Vulcan, without contact with Terran Humans, for the duration of the marriage.

Trapped by his heritage, and by Vulcan biology, Spock agrees to the marriage, and in turn stipulates that any children which result from the union would be raised by him, without interference from any other, including T'Prilia. Thinking to bind him to Vulcan for a longer period T'Pau and T'Prilia agree to this and the date and time of the marriage is set.

Starfleet directs the Enterprise to Avalon for the period of the year known

as Christmas. This is partly in recognition of services lately rendered to Earth during which the Enterprise managed to divert the entity referred to as V'ger from an avowed intent to destroy all life on Earth, and partly to allow the completion of the overhaul and rebuilding of the Enterprise which was summarily terminated when the Starship had cold-started out of dry dock in order to intercept V'ger. Avalon houses a Starfleet Academy, orbiting dry dock facilities and a selection of personnel in all stages of training, and so is admirably suited to complete the rebuilding of the Enterprise to Starfleet specifications, or to be more accurate, to Montgomery Scott's specifications.

Spock leaves for the Vulcan settlement commonly called The Refuge directly the Enterprise arrives at Avalon, without telling his friends that he is to marry T'Prilia on the day designated as Boxing Day and is to resign from Starfleet on that day. On the way to the Refuge Spock meets Doctor Florence Rood, who is the creator of the equations that he used to cold start the Enterprise's engines. The ancient (96 years young) scientist takes a shine to Spock (who she met forty years before on Vulcan) and she recognises the signs of imminent Pon Farr. Something has gone wrong. Instead of months, Spock realises that he has only hours before the Plak Tow starts.

Florence takes him to the Refuge where he collapses on the lawn outside the walls. He has arrived only to find that Stonn has once again interfered with his wedding plans. Spock has literally

walked in on Stonn's wedding - to T'Prilia.

Spock is rescued by Doctor Rood, who takes him to her house and summons Doctors Joanna and Leonard McCoy who confirm Spock's worst fears. Pon Farr has proceeded at an accelerated rate; instead of months barely sixteen hours are left to Spock. McCoy contacts Jim Kirk at the Port Admiral's residence (where he is staying for the Christmas holidays) and explains the situation.

After Kirk arrives at Doctor Rood's house Spock explains to Jim and Leonard about the marriage plans he has agreed to, and his intended resignation, and asks for their help in preventing his marriage to T'Pring, the only alternative now open to him except death.

Explaining that T'Pring has promoted the accelerated Pon Farr through the remnants of their childhood bond link, Spock pleads with his Thy'la to kill him rather than allow him to harm anyone once the Plak Tow has been reached. He totally rejects even considering the possibility of a marriage to T'Pring.

The pair reluctantly agree, then Leonard McCoy has a brilliant idea. Spock has gone through Pon Farr once, and has survived unmated. All he has to do is remember what it was his mind and body did to turn off the mating urge then and do the same thing again.

A simple idea, and one that hasn't been as easy to accomplish as McCoy's glib explanation has promised. While it is true that Spock hasn't entered the killing state of Plak Tow on schedule, the fever which is a side effect of the Pon Farr is still raging. And because Spock's mental faculties have been turned inwards in the effort to combat the mating urge, his mental shields have collapsed, causing his

Thy'la to receive the full broadcast of the struggle. If Jim Kirk and Leonard McCoy had been Vulcan, with the training given to all Vulcan males, they would have been able to shield themselves, but as they are only Humans the fever that now rages through Spock is mirrored in them too.

SODDE'S LAWES

Below is a translation of the only inscription found at the tomb site thought to be the burial place of the philosopher Sodde.

Sodde's reputation as a philosopher is based mainly on references made by contemporary writers, as Sodde's writings were almost wholly eradicated by the more extreme of the followers of Surak. It should be noted that Surak did not subscribe to this destruction. Indeed there is a passage in his writings that states that he found Sodde's Lawes to have a logic all of their own.

It should also be noted that the only reason that the inscription survived the destruction of the tomb carvings was that the stone had been slotted into place with the inscription hidden: to be revealed centuries later when the wall of which it had been a part collapsed during a seismic upheaval. It continues to be a matter of some debate, given the content of the Lawes, as to whether the carver inscribed the Lawes on the wrong face of the stone by accident, or by Sodde's design.

PLANNING STAGE.

LAWE THREE

ANY TASK UNDERTAKEN WILL ALWAYS GO WRONG AT THE MOST CRITICAL MOMENT.

LAWE ONE

ANY TASK UNDERTAKEN WILL ALWAYS TAKE LONGER TO COMPLETE THAN THE ORIGINAL ESTIMATE, HOWEVER GENEROUSLY MADE.

LAWE TWO

ANY TASK UNDERTAKEN WILL ALWAYS BE MORE COMPLEX TO EXECUTE THAN ORIGINALLY ALLOWED FOR, NO MATTER HOW DETAILED OR INTENSIVE THE

CHRISTMAS EVE

It was the night before Christmas and all through the house not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse, or the local planetary equivalent. Which was lucky for both the mouse and the local planetary equivalent, conceded Florence Rood, because any creature daft enough to stir in her house, or the garden, was in real danger of being inhumed by Claudius. Not that she approved of his hunting habits, but Claudius was, when all was said and done, a cat, and it was inherent in the nature of cats to pounce on anything that was either A) small, B) furry, or C) interesting. Claudius, being true to his nature, had no concept of size, and only the haziest notion of what constituted furry which meant that C) interesting left him with a whole planet full of potential targets.

She'd put down some food and water for him in the garden, but it was long past the time at which he was accustomed to be let in. She wondered if she should do so when he did arrive.

Doctor Joanna McCoy, currently assigned to the Starfleet Medical Centre at the Avalon Academy, interrupted her musings by handing her a cup of hot chocolate. "You really should get some sleep."

"Thank you, my dear, but at my age I don't seem to need that much sleep any more."

"Well rest then." Jo settled herself onto the long sofa and swung her legs up onto the cushions. She sipped at her own cup.

"Rest? With all this going on?"

Florence gestured around her living room, which was lit only by the twinkling lights on the Christmas tree and the

uneven flare of the burning logs in the fireplace. Her eyesight was not what it had been, despite the advances in medical science which had kept her reasonably hale into her ninety-sixth year, and she had to peer hard in the low light in order to make out the three long shapes on the rug in front of the fireplace. But she knew that they were there. She'd helped Jo tuck the blankets around them after they had collapsed. That had been some hours ago. She grinned at a thought that she knew Jo would not appreciate. As a young child she'd believed in Father Christmas and still remembered the thrill of joy on Christmas morning when she'd seen the pile of presents waiting for her. This Christmas all the room under her Christmas tree was occupied by three unconscious Starfleet officers.

"I haven't had this much excitement since my third - or was it my fourth? - husband tried to sell one of my inventions to the Klingons!"

"He didn't!" exclaimed Joanna.

"No. The miserable little squirt couldn't even manage to get that right. I sometimes wonder why I did marry him. That's the worst thing about getting excited about the physical ones, it always ... wears off!"

"Florence!"

Florence saw how Jo had stiffened and turned towards her. "Now I've gone and shocked you?"

"No ... Well ... Yes, a little." Jo put the cup down on the floor.

"That's the trouble with you youngsters. You look at an old body and all you see is an old body. You never take time to remember that just a few years ago that old body was as young as you are, or that in a few years time you'll be

the old body. And whatever it is that you're getting up to now the chances are that somewhere there is an old body who has done it first!"

Joanna contemplated the statement, ruefully acknowledged the rightness of the accusation and asked "Was he that good?"

"Yes. But that didn't stop me divorcing him when I found out what he'd been doing."

"So I should think." She reached downwards and replaced the damp cloth on her father's forehead. "Did he get into trouble with the authorities?"

"Only the Klingon ones, dear. They were quite peeved at him when they finally got the machine built and turned it on. I'd built a machine to measure the surface tension of water, trying to identify pollution by changes at the gas/water interface. I figured out what he was up to and I let him steal some plans that I'd specially modified just for him. They built the best bubble blowing machine ever."

Joanna giggled, visualising the outraged Klingons battling with bubbles.

"And I had the last laugh. Patented the new design and sold it to some people who built null-gee bath tubs. Null-gee bubble baths."

"Now that I don't believe."

"It's true. I even found a way of suspending colours and flavourings in the bubble walls. Bath times got to be real fun!" The remembering quality in her voice spoke of many hours of real fun.

"You tried it?"

"Of course. Jim's shed his flannel."

Joanna turned back towards the fire, tutted absently and retrieved the cloth, dipped it into a bowl of water and replaced the cooling cloth on Jim Kirk's forehead. Florence, she decided, was trying to distract her attention from the seriousness of the situation. And she'd succeeded for a while. The tricorder readouts said that the fever wasn't mounting any more, but it wasn't going down either. Joanna chewed on her lip. Their temperatures were dangerously high; under any normal circumstances she'd have whipped all three men into the Intensive Therapy section and started applying treatments to reduce their fevers. The trouble was that these were not normal circumstances, she knew exactly what was wrong with all three men, and no treatment in the universe had ever been effective against Pon Farr.

Spock was burning up, his body consuming itself in its efforts to answer the biological imperative that Spock was trying to deny by sheer will power. Or rather, won't power. Jo's lips twitched at the mental quip. She'd only met Florence for the first time a handful of hours before when the elderly woman had summoned them to help Spock, and already the woman's unconventional way of looking a life had infected her.

Jim Kirk started muttering again and twisted uneasily under the blankets. He rolled over and fetched up against Spock, one arm draped over Spock's chest. The muttering stopped and Jim relaxed with a whistling sigh onto the rug.

"Pest," muttered Jo, and got off the sofa to make her father's friend slightly more comfortable by easing a pillow under his head and putting the damp cloth back on it. The heat radiating from the three was tangible but she pulled the

blanket straight and tucked it back around Kirk. If nothing else it would serve to absorb some of the sweat which was pouring out of the Humans. Which reminded her of another problem. They were going to be very dehydrated when they finally woke up. Maybe she should start trying to replace the lost fluids now, but that would mean drawing on the medical resources of the Academy; she didn't want to do that unless it was absolutely necessary, and it wasn't, yet.

She took another set of readings. There was still no change. No decrease in Spock's fever and no decrease in the fevers of his Thy'la who were now sharing his plight. If Jim Kirk and her father had been Vulcans and trained for this sort of task they wouldn't have collapsed, but they weren't, they were only Human, and they were the only friends that Spock had.

Jo jerked awake, glancing anxiously at the trio on the rug before peering, bleary eyed, at Florence. "You should have woken me!" she said accusingly.

"What for? You need your sleep. You're the medical doctor here after all, and I've got the phaser handy if I need it."

Jo rubbed at her eyes, slumped back onto the sofa and admitted, "I don't think that I could use it."

"Don't worry. I can. I've got less to lose. Maybe another 20 years if I'm very lucky. You've got more than a century to go. That's what living amongst Vulcans does to you. Makes you think logically about things."

Jo snorted. "Didn't seem to do much for me."

"Oh yes it did. It shows, and on

them." Florence gestured to the trio.

Jo ignored her, trying to trace where the strange sound that had roused her was coming from. "Can you hear something?"

A scratching, scrabbling followed by a piteous yowl drew her attention to the window.

"Is something out there?" she asked

"Yes. And he wants to come in here. I'm going to have to let him in. If I don't the Starfleet Security team that's watching me is going to notice that I haven't let him in and they will come to investigate. We don't want that, do we?"

"Absolutely not. What is he?"

"Cold and hungry. He's always hungry. I think he has hollow legs and a hollow tail. Cold... well it is seasonal weather for Christmas in this hemisphere."

As she was talking Florence had stood up, a trifle stiffly, waited until her body decided to obey the directions dispatched by her brain and moved towards the big French windows that looked out over her garden. She pulled back the heavy curtains slightly, opened the window a fraction and let in a blast of cold air, accompanied by a slight feline shape. Florence shut the window with a snap directly the long tail was inside and said, "Brrrr. It must be close to freezing out there. I hope that the Security team have their thermals on."

Jo stared at the fur-clad shape winding itself in welcoming figures of eight about Florence's ankles. "That is a cat!"

"Yep. Genuine Terran moggie. Jo, meet Claudius."

"Claudius? Right." The shadowy shape stopped between Florence's ankles and peered suspiciously at Jo, who was still reclining on the sofa. She waved a hand in welcome. "Greeting, Oh Cat."

Claudius continued to regard her with deep suspicion, then seemed to decide that she wasn't really very interesting at all and sat down to begin an intensive toilette.

Florence chuckled, stepped carefully away from him, and resumed her seat in the vast armchair that over the years had become perfectly deformed to fit her.

"Okay, I surrender. Just how did you acquire a genuine cat? Importation of animals that could interrupt the ecosystem is strictly prohibited, and the Security team that camps out watching over you must have seen that by now."

Claudius ignored the conversation and started on another paw.

"As you said, he's an illegal alien. Poor little thing was just a scrap of fur. Some bright specimen decided to bring him, and a dozen or so lady type kittens in, and set up a cat farm. He got caught, of course, but that left the local peace enforcers with a hatful of kittens, and they're all soft-hearted enough not to just simply destroy perfectly healthy animals. So the Xeno-biologists at the Academy ensured that there wouldn't be any next generation and started looking for suitable homes for them."

Jo regarded Florence with undisguised amusement. The Head of Experimental Engineering at Avalon's Starfleet Academy gazed back innocently.

"How much did you bribe them?" asked Jo, not fooled for a second.

"Bribe? Bribe?? I have never resorted to bribery in my life. If you have to bribe someone it means that you haven't done your homework well enough."

"I'll try to remember that. Why Claudius?"

Florence stretched out a hand, fingers extended and slightly crooked, sweeping it through the air. Jo grinned then glanced down at her unconscious charges. "Er.. Will he...?"

"I doubt it. Have you ever seen a cat meet a Vulcan?"

"No."

"Watch and learn," invited Florence.

Claudius, his fur once again immaculately smooth and his whiskers bristling, glanced regally about the dimly light room, decided that, in the absence of any more interesting diversion, Florence and Jo would have to suffice and started to glide delicately across the rugs towards them. He paused as the three figures on the rug by the fire came into sight. Jo saw his eyes widen then narrow, and his ears pitch forwards as he sank down onto his belly, quiveringly still except for the very tip of his tail which twitched backwards and forwards like a demented metronome.

So long did the cat hold his position that Jo had to risk interrupting his deliberations and got off the sofa to replace the blanket that her father had displaced in his feverish twisting. She needn't have been concerned. Claudius ignored her as thoroughly as he had since he had first entered the room. He only wanted to know about the most desirable person he'd ever encountered.

"It's like watching a little child

who's been granted their dearest wish. Awe, eagerness and 'I'm sure if I touch it it'll disappear.'"

Claudius began to inch forwards and Jo tensed herself, ready to bat the tiny creature aside, then she heard the low insistent purr and Claudius snuggled down beside Spock. Jo looked at Florence, her body expressing a question that Florence recognised.

Florence shrugged. "I have no idea. All I know is that if you put any size cat anywhere near a Vulcan you end up with a deliriously happy cat and an embarrassed Vulcan. Doesn't matter how or where, it always works. Amanda said that Sarek once had the same effect on a Siberian Tiger."

"You know Amanda and Sarek?"

"Why yes. I worked with Amanda for years, when I was on Vulcan. The Academy wasn't as it is now. Outworlders were a definite rarity then, and fortunately Amanda and I found that we could be friends as well as working colleagues. We've kept in touch ever since. Sarek pretends not to mind me too much. I irritated the hell out of him and he was glad to see the back of me."

Jo found herself in sympathy with Sarek. Florence Rood loose on Vulcan must have caused shockwaves through the establishment, who were more used to a decorous mode of behaviour. Her thoughts drifted on to the way Amanda and Sarek had invited her to live in their house while she attended the Medical School at the Vulcan Science Academy. Even the newfound knowledge that the main reason behind this very generous gesture was that Spock had named her father as T'hy'la did not fully explain just why Sarek had allowed her to live there.

The impact that Federation

involvement had on the Vulcans and the enormous changes in lifestyles and options that had happened on Vulcan during her own lifetime was causing major problems to the Vulcan leadership. Jo knew that the more Traditionalistic groups were still attempting to promote a popular movement to force Vulcan to leave the Federation. As one of the leaders of the group who were trying to encourage a more elastic interpretation of IDIC, Sarek might well have accepted her stay in order to show that Terrans could conform to Vulcan standards of behaviour. She'd certainly tried hard enough.

"What's a Siberian Tiger?" Jo asked after a longish pause in the conversation.

"Feral feline. Big striped job, lots of fangs and claws, about the size of the sofa."

Jo looked about her at the dimensions of the vast, stuffed item of furniture that she was reclining on, then looked back at Florence, disbelief writ large on her face and clearly visible even in the light from the fire.

"True, Amanda told me about it."

"I'll ask her," challenged Jo, struggling with the image of a cat the size of a sofa curled up and purring next to the ultimate dignity of the Federation Ambassador.

"Okay, but make sure that Sarek isn't around."

Jo checked on the tricorder readings again and sat up straight. "The fever's dropping. One degree down."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Heart rate is down a couple of points too, and breathing is slowed

slightly." Relief made her voice wobbled slightly. "I think we might just make it."

CHRISTMAS DAY

Captain Jerry Weston, Port Admiral in charge of the Starfleet Academy on Avalon, gripped his glass tightly, wished that its contents were something other than mineral water and a slice of lemon, and seethed. As he was the senior Starfleet officer present he attempted to seethe discreetly, but he was sure that Uhura was deliberately baiting him. But then he was equally as sure that the beautiful woman was baiting his wife Dolores too, and just about every woman in the room. And it was a big room. The Academy Hall was a multi-level multi-purpose function room and the function it was fulfilling tonight was to attempt to contain the Christmas Day Ball. There were twenty-seven species present, chatting, eating, drinking, dancing. Doing, in fact, all the things that people normally did at parties, or at Starfleet Christmas Day Balls.

Uhura was stunning. The peaches and cream chiffon creation that somehow managed to continue to defy gravity in order to cover up all the essential elements of her form allowed just enough visibility to create the illusion that it was only a matter of time before something more interesting would become visible. The smile lurking on Uhura's lips mocked anyone who dared to stare for too long, and the brilliance of her eyes was a challenge too pointed to ignore. As Jerry watched she sashayed over to where Montgomery Scott was talking to a trio of very young and quite pretty girls and the pair whirled off into a dreamy waltz.

He sensed, rather than saw, his Security Chief appear at his side and asked, "Why is she doing that?"

The Security Chief didn't pretend not to understand. It was, after all, Christmas Day and she was feeling a little mellow. "Pride."

"Pride?"

"She overheard some of the younger members of the Enterprise crew express the opinion that she was 'past it'. I think she decided to show them that whatever else she is, she definitely still has it, and it's all in full working order."

Jerry nodded then asked, "Is it safe to let her near the Scot like that? In his condition..."

"He's as sober as you are."

Jerry dragged his eyes away from the pair on the dance floor and stared at his Security Chief. The nondescript, slender, almost mousey woman smiled back, the wolfish grin revealing a strength of personality that the unwary, or the uninformed, did not become conversant with until it was far too late.

"The maniac tinker has figured out that the Tarl your loving wife siced on him as bodyguards to free up Jim Kirk from the job will not dare to argue back with the great Montgomery Scott while there is any chance of him being sober and remembering that they dared to contradict the great man."

"So he's playing at being drunk?"

"And having some wonderful technical arguments with the kiddies, who are learning more about practical engineering fixes than they have in the last six months. The trouble with the Tarl is they have too much respect for someone with a reputation, and they won't challenge authority. Maybe we should suggest to Doctor Rood that she acts drunk occasionally?"

Weston shook his head decisively. "No. Absolutely not. I'm still getting flak from the Vulcan staffers about her unauthorised redecoration of the Engineering Labs."

The Security Chief looked blandly innocent, then offered, "K'nish is a pretty boring colour."

"That colour was the one that Solen wanted the Labs painted."

"Yes."

Weston breathed heavily through his nose, biting back all the comments that he longed to make. Solen was the senior of the teachers supplied by the Vulcan Institute of Science to Avalon, and he never let anyone forget it. He was a royal pain sometimes, especially when he thought that his rights and privileges were being infringed, and Florence Rood took a savage delight in finding out how to infringe whenever she could. Weston wondered just what it was that she had against the Vulcan. It was true that he wasn't a likable man; it seemed to Weston that even the other Vulcans who were assigned to Avalon as civilian teachers didn't like him, or any of his family, very much. A thought recurred to him and he asked,

"Just how did the students get access to the Engineering Labs without the Security patrols spotting them? And how did the patrols miss them while they were spraying the walls? It must have taken hours."

The Chief looked even more bland. "There was an oversight in the patrol schedules. I have corrected it."

Convinced that his suspicions were based in fact Weston turned back to look at the end of the dance, and the way that Scott's elaborate stagger returned as soon

as Uhura's feet were out of range. "Any news of the party at the Rood house yet?"

"Didn't I say? There are five inbound now. Of course it would make my job easier if I had some idea of what was going on."

Weston smiled and said, "Didn't I say? They've got a sick Vulcan."

The Chief's comments about her senior officer's penchant for complicating any situation out of all recognition brought a delighted grin to his face and two new curses to his already extensive repertoire. He wandered away, exchanging compliments with his many guests and quartered the Hall trying to track down any of the five who were causing so much disruption to his own holiday plans. A small portion of his brain turned over the fact that his Security Chief seemed to share the common dislike of Solen and his family. He wondered just what it was they had done to earn that disfavour. He finally spotted Jo and Florence standing at the edge of a flying balcony that overlooked the main assembly area.

"Good afternoon, Doctor, Doctor. Glad you could come. Are you enjoying yourselves?"

Both women turned, startled by the hail, and exchanged a guilty glance before Jo replied.

"Good afternoon, Captain. We've only just arrived. Everyone does seem to be having a good time."

Florence smiled and added her mile. "I think that this is going to be one of the best Christmas Day Balls yet. You've certainly drawn them in."

"We try. Had a few bad moments. The Christmas tree was a bit of a disaster.

All the leaves fell off."

"It looks okay from here." Jo looked appreciatively at the tall, beautifully decorated spire below them. "One of the best that I've seen."

"That's not the original. I borrowed it from the Enterprise. Scott authorised it. Jim was with you, I believe. Is he here?"

"Ah yes. Sorry about poaching your guest. He's staying with me for a few days."

"Oh?" said Jerry innocently, noting the glances passing between the two. "Been having fun?"

"Well, it's definitely been interesting," said Jo.

"You might even say fascinating," said Florence, "But then again, you might not."

"I'm glad you managed to resist that particular temptation. I take it that they are here?"

Jo noted the hardening of the voice and a slight slip into command tone territory and said soothingly, "They went to find a bar." She waved in the direction of the lower level. Stupid she was not, and Jerry Weston was her commanding officer. It would do her no good to antagonise him.

"They went looking for a bar. All three of them? You expect me to believe that Spock is looking for a bar?" Jerry walked to the balustrade and looked down, searching for familiar figures in dress uniform.

"I see Jim. Just to the left of the tree. Satan's toenails! He has got Spock with him, so we've got twenty-eight species here now. That's a record. And a Vulcan

woman, what a beauty! She looks familiar, who is she?" Aware of the sudden tension in the two doctors who were staring at the scene below Jerry paid more attention to the tableau.

Spock, looking amazingly thin in his dress uniform, was standing rigidly upright, his hands clenched behind him. As they watched McCoy joined Kirk to flank the Vulcan. The attack/defence postures of the two men looked totally incongruous with their dress uniforms. The Vulcan woman was facing them, and they were talking.

"I give thee greetings, Spock. I have been awaiting thee."

"Indeed?" The right eyebrow rose a fraction of a millimetre.

"Do thee still call these Humans Thy'la?"

"I do."

"Then it is fitting that they are here with thee. Thee and I have certain matters to discuss."

"I cannot think of any matter that I have to discuss with you."

"Indeed?" T'Pring's right eyebrow rose a fraction, mocking Spock's normal gesture. Jim's expression became murderous. McCoy suddenly showed teeth.

"Stonn is married to the Lady T'Prilla. Thee will require an alternative."

"Why?"

T'Pring gazed calmly back at the man before her. The Humans were displaying strong emotions, anger, frustration, and, perhaps, hate. Spock was glacial in his control. She

complimented herself on her choice. He was controlling the fires well.

"I felt thee at the Refuge. I called to thee and thee heard me. I awaited thee. Why did thee not come to me?"

"There was no need."

The perfect features of the woman did not alter. "There is need, Spock. Thy need. That is why thee contacted thy Family. Why thee came here to T'Prilia."

Spock remained silent.

"I know thy mind too well, Spock. Were not thee and I bonded by the linking at seven? I heard thee at the Refuge. Thy time is come again. Thee burn. T'Prilia and Stonn have chosen to marry, leaving me free again. For thee."

"I have no need of you."

"Does thee think to find another here for thee? There is none. I was most careful. There is none here that could mate with thee and survive, and thee will not cause death so that thee might live. Therefore thee must come to me."

"And if I choose my own death instead?"

"To dishonour thy Family by denying thy heritage before all? Even thee could not do that, Spock."

Jim and Bones flicked glances at each other but held their peace and watched T'Pring.

"There are no other possibilities."

"Incorrect. There are always possibilities. The fact that they are not yet known does not preclude their existence."

"So thee has always maintained. And whilst thee searches for thy other possibility, will thee dare to go amok amongst thy ... friends? Have thee thought of the dangers involved in such an occurrence to them?"

"I am in no danger of going amok."

Something awoke in T'Pring's eyes at that bald statement. Sensuously, daring his T'hy'la to interfere, she reached out one slender, perfect finger and trailed it down the side of Spock's face, then traced the jaw-line delicately.

All three saw disbelief, then fear, flame in her face.

"Thee are not! But I heard thee. I felt thee answer me. Who hast thee cleaved to?"

"You have no right to question me. You have no call on me. You resigned all rights when you Challenged."

"How can thee avoid the fire? It is not possible. Thee reacted to my call at the Refuge. It is thy Time."

"You were mistaken. It is to be expected, under the circumstances."

T'Pring slumped. Her face still wore the norm of control and revealed nothing, but every line in her body registered her defeat.

"What shall I do now? Now that thee has rejected me?"

"Go back to T'Pau and tell her you have failed to ensnare me. She may have other duties which you can perform for her."

"May I tell T'Pau when thee will present thy chosen wife to thy Family?"

"I have no wife, nor any need of one now. There is much to be said for having Humans as T'hy'la. Especially when they are such as these."

Spock gestured to the men flanking him. Kirk and McCoy had relaxed and straightened up slightly when it had become obvious to them that T'Pring was not able to provoke Spock. Now, catching the innuendo, both grinned at the proud woman before them. McCoy met her eyes squarely and from somewhere deep inside, produced a knowing, confident smile in acknowledgement of the question she so clearly wished to ask. Kirk met her eyes too, and to his lasting amazement, blushed furiously. They had both offered Spock that alternative.

The glare re-centred on Spock.

"Thee hast found thy other possibility. I wish thee, all, comfort in it. Health and long life to thee and to thy chosen ones, Spock."

She made the Vulcan salute and Spock's hands remained clenched behind his back.

"I bid you safe journey."

She whirled from them and left, her abrupt departure causing a ripple through the party throng as she passed.

In the secluded area beside the Christmas tree Spock's shoulders bowed as an uncontrollable relief surged through him. He was only vaguely aware of Jim and Bones supporting him to a chair and the warble of a medi-scanner, followed by the all too familiar hiss of a hypo. His vision cleared and he lifted his head to face his vastly amused friends. McCoy broke first, command training giving Jim the edge in self-control.

"Forgive me if I'm wrong, but I think you just intimated to T'Pring that Jim and I are your lovers."

"I did."

McCoy gulped, then swallowed.

Jim finally managed to ask, in a rather strangled voice, "Why?"

"It is regrettable, but I find that I am ... Human enough to feel the need for revenge."

"And that was revenge?"

"Oh yes. Yes, it was. For any Vulcan woman to be told that a provoked male could prefer another male as partner is vexatious, but it is acceptable. The custom is of long standing amongst my people. To be told that one whom she has provoked has turned for partnership to not one, but to two males, and they Human, is a tremendous insult. Even infinite diversity must have some limits."

Slight colour washed over his too pale face.

"She will go to T'Pau and tell her that I have taken you both as mate. I will be called to give account of my actions, and I will be able to tell the Council of Houses that I alone am free of the mating urge, and by a method which is unique to me and can never be duplicated."

"Sounds to me like a pretty thorough revenge. I pity T'Pring's next husband. He is in for one hell of a time."

"I doubt that she will acquire one."

McCoy sniffed, still taking readings of Spock's condition, and surreptitiously signalled to Jim to keep Spock seated. He received an equally secretive acknowledgment before he replied,

"With T'Pau's patronage, sorry, matronage?"

"Even with the advantages of a marriage to a Family that is promoted by T'Pau, there will be no man who will risk the alliance with T'Pring's Family."

"Why not?" McCoy asked.

"Women can survive the Pon Farr unmated. It is unpleasant, but with the medical assistance now available, it can be accomplished without lasting harm. Males, as you know, can not. The custom of mate provision is the only safeguard that men have. Could you trust your life to one such as T'Pring?"

Kirk fielded the question. "No, but then we know what she is capable of, as you do. Others won't be so lucky."

"Luck will not enter into it, Jim. The Family of any unbonded males inquire most closely into the history of any unmated female. Not all Families are like mine, allowing someone like T'Pring to be chosen. No Family, however desperate, will allow one of their men to be allied to her now."

"Are you sure that they will notice?" asked Kirk, frowning, remembering all too well the heat and the dust and the tightness in his chest as Spock had strangled him.

"Yes." Spock gazed into the distance, across time and space to his homeland. "Thee remembers the Challenge? When T'Pau asked T'Pring if she were prepared to become property rather than wife?"

"You think we could forget that?"

Spock shrugged a non-verbal apology. "The words have a literal meaning. By issuing the Challenge

T'Pring indicated that she was prepared to resign the status of wife. In fact, she gave up all rights, even the status of citizen. She was property from that instant onwards, owned by Stonn because I gave her to him. By all custom, if one of a mated pair wishes to take a different partner on the next Time, he or she must gain the agreement of the current partner and also provide that partner with another acceptable and willing mate. If no alternative partner is provided, then the existing partnership must be maintained, unless the Challenge is issued."

McCoy saw what Spock was leading up to. "And now T'Pring isn't married to Stonn any more, T'Prilia is; and T'Pring isn't married to anyone!"

"Thus revealing that she was not wife, although she lived as Stonn's wife and bore his child. And although the Family was sent here to Avalon the information about them and the child will be known on Vulcan. As it was widely known that she was to have been my wife. The alliance between our Families was widely expected; many plans were made because of the news that it was to happen. And I am regarded as a subject of some interest."

"Almost a legend," quoted Jim smugly.

"Since my abrupt departure from Gol the legend has become slightly more than almost. The fact that she Challenged me and chose you as Champion was suppressed. The idea of an outworlder so used was considered not to be acceptable to Vulcan in general."

"Wouldn't have done T'Pau's reputation too much good either," commented Jim.

"She's trapped too," put in McCoy.

"How can she take any action against you without revealing that she had a hand in the first Challenge, and the custom-breaking that went on there? Not to mention this little turn-about."

"That is her problem. I believe that the full tale of T'Pol's Challenge will remain a secret. It will be as unacceptable now as it was then. It will be known to all that she did Challenge because the fact that she was and is property and never wife will be undeniable. There will be much conjecture in that I caused no reported death, and am still obviously alive and in good health."

"And unmated," interjected Kirk slyly.

"Doubtless the logical assumption will be reached that my unmarried status can be accounted to my mixed heritage."

"The matter of your good health is also an assumption, although not logically arrived at," said Bones acidly.

"Compared to my condition yesterday, I am in good health, and I will be better tomorrow than I am today."

Spock stood up a trifle shakily but with great determination, exalting in the feeling of completeness and wholeness. "It is over, and we are supposed to be finding the bar."

High above them Jerry proffered handkerchiefs to mop up a sudden flood of tears from the two doctors.

"You want to tell me what's going on?"

"You know that Spock was ill, yes? Well, it looks as if he's going to be okay," said Jo.

"What was wrong with him?"

pressed Jerry.

"Overwork," said Florence shortly.

"Florence Rood, you have a filthy mind," said Jo, stuck somewhere between laughter and outrage.

"What did I say?"

Knowing that he wasn't going to get any sense out of the two women Jerry left them squabbling and went off to try a more fruitful source of information. Somewhere between leaving the doctors and intercepting Jim Kirk, Weston had what he later thought of as a sudden attack of insanity and, under the dagger gaze of his wife, invited Uhura to dance.

"It's a waltz, and it's the only dance that I do which will give you an even chance of not being trampled on."

Dimpling, Uhura curtsied, and the pair swept out onto the floor. After several showy turns Uhura said, "Your wife is watching us."

"Yes."

"So is your Security Chief."

"Nah. She's watching my wife, trying to assess how near boiling point she is. Your dress is very... charming."

Uhura lowered her eyes in a mock bashful simper. "It does seem to charm a lot of people."

"Then I take it that you are enjoying yourself?"

"Oh yes, Captain sir. I'd forgotten just how much fun a girl could have at one of these parties. On the Enterprise I'm the senior female and have to ensure that I present 'a good image', and 'preserve decorum'."

"Not many chances to let your hair down?"

"Not many."

"You make the most of it then, and the New Year Farewell bash too, only don't expect Scott to be sober at that one," he warned.

Her delighted giggle floated though the Hall and turned several more heads in their direction. Uhura looked up at Jerry with wide eyes. "Are you going to ask your wife to dance next?"

"Today let's both be a little mad."

Dolores Weston, a Captain in Starfleet Science Section, and the mother of three growing sons, watched the passage of her husband and the exotic Communications Officer and vowed that at New Year she would turn a few heads herself. Not that Uhura was the only stunning woman in the room. The blonde by the bar was quite an eyeful. The dress was elegant, the long hair natural and the face held more than a hint of character. Several men had stopped and chatted to her, including Leonard McCoy, but he didn't seem to have the success in attracting her attention that Jim Kirk currently seemed to be having. The attraction between the two seemed mutual. Dolores smiled and looked around for the Security Chief, who materialised at her side a few minutes later.

"Who's the blonde making eyes at Kirk?"

"Diplomat. Name's Sarah Rogerson, from Continental America. Terran citizen. She's on the staff of the Federation Council. A wizard administrator; works mostly at the H.Q. attached to the Presidents' Office in Paris, but does some field work when things get

really desperate. She's here to visit with family. Current status is unattached."

Dolores watched the two toast each other, the way their bodies seemed to angle towards each other. "Current status should be amended."

"Noted."

The two smiled at each other and went back to being the Chief of Security and the Senior Female Officer.

The Chief kept an eye on the progress of the courtship at the bar. It was progressing nicely when a seemingly inebriated Scott staggered up to Kirk and determinedly interrupted. Knowing that Scott was totally sober she watched as Kirk made rueful apologies and helped Scott away. A glance at the people in the ante-room that they entered caused her to post guards on the door to prevent interruption and to have the two trundlers used by Kirk and co. brought round to the nearest exit.

She knocked on the door and slid into the room, smiling at the furious Starship Captain who moved to block her view of the assembled company. "I've got the corridor outside sealed off temporarily and I've had your trundlers brought to the exit."

Kirk nodded. "Thanks. Your people suffer from amnesia?"

"On a sporadic basis," she assured him.

Kirk turned and addressed the two doctors McCoy. "Is he going to be able to walk?"

"No chance. He's out for the night. We should never have let him come," said Jo.

McCoy senior added, "We'll have to carry him."

"The corridor's clear," stated Kirk, and he and McCoy debated how to get Spock's unconscious form away from the Ball quickly. The Security teams were soon enjoying the sight of a Starship Captain walking nonchalantly down the corridor to the exit with an unconscious Vulcan draped limply about his shoulders in a classic fireman's hoist. Scott shrugged and ambled back to the Ball, assured that Spock would receive enough care to make him wish that he'd never left Vulcan.

The same classic technique was employed at Florence's house to get Spock down to the guest bedroom which she'd offered to him. The guest suites were sited below ground level and extended out under the garden. Access was via an ornate circular staircase which age made difficult for Florence to use. She left the Captain and the two doctors to manage the task of putting the Vulcan to bed and went to make some refreshments. She was wheeling the trolley into the living room when they reappeared, Kirk complaining loudly that Spock shouldn't have gone to the Ball in the first place.

"Jim, you know why he wanted to go there tonight. It was a certainty that T'Pring was going to show up and he wanted to face her down as soon as he could." McCoy sank onto the padded sofa and leaned heavily back against the cushions, spreading his arms out along the back. "You couldn't have prevented him going there tonight, any more than I could, so stop complaining."

Jo handed a beaker of frothy coffee to Kirk and said impishly, "That's not why he's peeved. Jim had made a friend at the Ball."

Kirk blushed slightly and retorted, "I said before we went that he should have stayed here and rested."

Jo carried two beakers over to the sofa and curled up against her father as Florence interrupted what promised to be a long speech.

"You know what your trouble is, Kirk? You haven't ever really treated Spock as an alien."

"What? Of course I have."

"No you haven't. You think of him as an officer in your command, a trusted friend and confidante." Florence ticked off the points on her fingers. "A scientist of truly awesome ability and someone who can always be trusted to look after everyone and not forget anything. You never once treated him as an alien. Which is to your credit in some ways, shows a commendable lack of bigotry. Sometimes, like now, you simply have to remember that, first and foremost, Spock is an alien from an alien culture and no matter how well he seems to blend in with us and our foibles, we are aliens to him."

"She's right, Jim. We try to help him to fit into our culture but we seldom give more than lip service to what he needs. This latest episode proves it. How much do we really know about Vulcan culture? Apart from one trip to Vulcan that was less than successful and the trip Sarek and Amanda made to Babel, we barely got any information about him from him at all!"

Kirk threw up his arms in a theatrical gesture and plumped down into a chair. "Too close to him. He's just Spock."

"Oh no he isn't," contradicted Florence. "He is vastly more than just

Spock'. He's Sarek's son, and if I remember correctly, Sarek's heir, and Sarek is the heir of the House of Surak. I think that you recognise that name?"

Jim stopped in the act of reaching out for the beaker he'd placed on the table. "Surak's heir? Are you sure?"

"I worked with Amanda on some stuff for the Vulcan Academy and I did spend quite a long time on Vulcan. I got to know Amanda pretty well, I was one of the few Terran females around and I had a high security rating to boot. I was also as nosey as hell and I wanted to know about Vulcans. Didn't you know about Spock's Family?"

"Well we knew he was a member of the House of Surak, but not that he was the Heir Apparent!"

"It certainly explains a lot though," put in McCoy. "Like how come T'Pol was so interested in getting her claws into him again, and why he was 'almost a legend'."

"That being who is your T'Pol and who is now sleeping peacefully in one of my guest rooms has the potential to be vastly more than he is now, and I don't just mean in the political sense."

"More?" asked Jim.

"Remember that Vulcan life spans are much longer than ours are. In Vulcan terms Spock is somewhere in his teens, barely adult in fact, and still in the process of growing up," stated Jo.

"Oh. My." muttered her father. "Think of how much a Human changes between fourteen and eighteen."

"Yeah, and you lot are feeding in all sorts of different inputs, experiences that no Vulcan kid has ever been exposed to

before." Florence leered at them. "When he finally decides to make the change into adulthood and grow up and have a proper career, I guess that will be about the time you decide to retire from the 'Fleet'"

"Why then?" interrupted McCoy. "He'll be in line to run Starfleet by then!"

"But would he want to, Dad?"

"Want to?" echoed Kirk. "Why wouldn't he?"

"Because he stays with you because he's having fun," said Florence, as if she thought the reason should be as obvious to Kirk as it was to her.

"Fun?" breathed Kirk.

"You really don't understand him at all, do you? You're interesting, different. You don't conform to narrow ways of looking at life. You keep on doing the unexpected. He doesn't have time to get bored. He doesn't know what you're going to do next, how you're going to react."

"Now hold on. That isn't true. When I was being court martialled he said that he could predict my behaviour, that he knew how I was going to behave. The same way that if he dropped a hammer on a high gravity planet he knew that the hammer would go downwards."

"He only thinks that he does. The fun part about the Enterprise is that sometimes the hammer goes sideways or even straight up!"

"He finds us fascinating," said McCoy.

"Right. So when he does decide to put away the toys of childhood and take

up his adult estate my guess is that Vulcan society had better watch out, because they are not going to be ready for what they get."

"Heck of a prospect, when you look at it like that. We're baby sitters for a forty-year-old Vulcan," muttered McCoy.

"And you are not to tell him," warned Florence sternly.

"Pardon?"

"Let him grow up... naturally. He's got to evolve at his own rate and in his own time. No good putting ideas into his head now when there won't be a result for another twenty-odd years. It's as bad as telling a child to enjoy his childhood, that he'll grow up real soon now. The child doesn't understand what adult means, any more than Spock would now, so why worry him with it, and force him to face it before he's ready."

"Prime Directive," announced Jim Kirk. "I can live with that."

"If you survive you can," commented his C.M.O. wryly.

"You're in as much trouble as I am, McCoy, and don't you forget it!"

"The trouble's over. Isn't it, Dad?"

Florence put her beaker down carefully. "Forgive me if I seem a trifle dense but I was under the impression that the... er... little problem... was resolved?"

"If you're asking 'Is he going to die on us?' the answer is no. The hormone levels are dropping nicely, thank you, and the booster shots are taking care of the incipient vitamin and mineral deficiencies. The medical side of things is under control." McCoy looped an arm about Jo and hugged her closer.

"However the diplomatic incidents are only just about to begin. Maybe we should go back to the Enterprise?"

Kirk shook his head decisively. "That would put us firmly into Starfleet territory, and I want to keep 'Fleet out of this if I can. Nogura is simply waiting for a chance to ground us and this mess would give him the perfect excuse."

"Nogura? As in Chief of Starfleet Command, you will do exactly as I order you to do Nogura? What did you do to get *him* in a snit?" asked Florence, diverted from Spock by the strong smell of gossip.

"Oh, not a lot." Jim shrugged nonchalantly.

"The way I heard it you hijacked the Enterprise out of dry dock and refused to give her back."

"Jo! As if I'd do a thing like that! Where did you hear that rumour?"

"Word gets around. There were a lot of witnesses; and the Enterprise did leave early; and Spock did want to talk to Florence about using her cold start formula; and what did happen to Will Decker? He was supposed to be the Captain"

"He grew up."

"Jim?" Jo looked from the Captain to her father and back.

"A very condensed version, and even saying this much is breaking Heaven knows how many regulations. I'm only saying this much to stop you nagging me." Florence snorted as Jim pointed a finger at her.

"You already know that there was an alert on, the whole world knows that.

The reason for the alert was that an intelligent machine decided to pay Earth a visit. We managed to achieve communication with it and persuaded it to leave Earth undisturbed. As part of the communications process Will Decker... evolved."

"Dad?"

"A slender version but absolutely true," Bones assured her. "The Enterprise was the only Federation Starship that could intercept V'ger before it reached Earth, but the warp engines weren't even commissioned, which is why Spock and Scott used your formula as the basis for the cold start process, Florence, and that was why Spock wanted to talk to you."

"The machine was called V'ger?" asked Florence.

"That's what it called itself; it was sentient. I did hijack the Enterprise." Kirk's face grew sad. "I'm kind of unhappy with the way I behaved then. I wasn't exactly a nice person to know."

"What our revered and respected Captain is trying to say, in the most obscure way, is that he wasn't in the game with all his marbles." Bones smiled reflectively. "Then again, he wasn't the only one, not by any means."

"We got lucky. Very, very lucky, and we came out of it without getting Earth wiped clean of life," Jim said sombrely, his face drained of expression as he again faced the reality of just how close they had all come to extermination.

Florence laughed. "Nice try, Jim, but if you were that badly out of sync, 'Fleet would never have confirmed you as Captain and given you the Enterprise."

"Blackmail!" Jim uttered the word disdainfully.

"You blackmailed 'Fleet?" Jo sat up. "How?"

McCoy gleefully enlightened her. "It seems that Jimbo here, the man who purely hated paperwork and had to be bullied by Spock to get even the most basic reports out on time, took to filling up his working hours as head of 'Fleet Ops by writing reports."

"Wasn't fit for anything else," muttered Jim savagely.

"Whatever. It turned out that when he was an Admiral and Chief of 'Fleet Operations he had written an elegant and lengthy appraisal of 'Fleet depositions which pointed out certain flaws in defence cover, attack tactics, you know, command stuff like that. So when it came to the washup..."

"Washup?" interrupted Florence. "What's a washup?"

"The enquiry. The wake. When everyone gets together to wash the dirty linen and figure out who got it dirty in the first place. Jimmy here stands up and hits them with the report, pointing out that he'd pointed to the ramifications of just such a probability fourteen months before it happened. All his recommendations had been turned down flat. If they hadn't, we wouldn't have needed to take the Enterprise out of dry dock because there would have been other ships on station within intercept range."

"There again, if there had been other ships in range the chances are we wouldn't have an Earth with a viable biosphere any more. It was just a fluke," explained Kirk.

Florence picked up her coffee and saluted him. "Here's to flukes, luck, and may we have more of the same."

"I'll drink to that," agreed Jo.

"We're going to need all the luck we can get," said Jim gloomily.

"The diplomatic incidents that you mentioned?"

"Yeah. Them."

"Why? What diplomatic incidents? Dad?"

McCoy grinned a huge grin. "Tonight our lovely, logical, unemotional friend told T'Pring a whopping big lie."

"He didn't," countered Jim. "He let her tell herself it."

"Whatever. T'Pring now believes this ... error and is going to tell the people at The Refuge, and some of them are bound to be Spock's relatives, and they are going to come looking for us," he indicated himself and Jim, "and they will want a full and complete explanation."

Florence tried to smother a yawn. "I have the feeling that I might regret this question, but if I don't ask it, wanting to ask it is going to drive me nuts! What did Spock let T'Pring infer that isn't actually so?"

"Well..." Bones looked at Jim.

"Hmmm..." said Jim, looking at Bones.

"Out with it!" demanded Jo, poking her father in the ribs.

"T'Pring thinks that we're married," blurted out McCoy.

Jo frowned. "We can't be. You're my father."

"Not you and me. Me and Jim. And

Spock."

"All of you? To each other?"

"Yeah."

Florence started giggling. "IDIC," she spluttered.

Kirk and McCoy exchanged weary looks.

"IDIC?" asked Jo puzzled.

"Infinite Diversity," cackled Florence, slopping her coffee.

"In Infinite Combin..." Jo's voice broke and she curled up clutching at her ribs.

It took a little while for Florence and Jo to calm down enough to continue the discussion.

"Whoever said that Vulcans were logical?" asked Florence, mopping her streaming eyes.

"It seems that a ... triangular partnership is - at least T'Pring thinks that it is. I guess that mental compatibility is as important, if not more important, than physical compatibility to a Vulcan."

Jo made a choking noise. "If you're married to Spock, does that make him my stepfather or my stepmother?"

Jim's face twisted into a rueful grin. "Keep laughing. If you think that you've got relational problems you might just spare a minute to consider me and your father."

"Why?"

"T'Pring is going to tell Spock's relations, who are coming to the wedding that should have been taking place

tomorrow. Spock told me that he thinks that Sarek is going to turn up this time. If we had married Spock, Sarek would be our father-in-law."

Florence stopped giggling and sat up. "But he will think that he *is* your father-in-law."

"Hence our diplomatic incidents. We may be able to talk our way out of it. That trick that T'Pring tried to pull on Spock, provoking Pon Farr, and T'Prilia marrying Stonn without Spock's consent, will help our case. But we've got to get Sarek to listen to us first, and I don't think that he'll be in any mood to do that once the people at The Refuge tell him that the Human contingent in his family has just increased."

"Sarek is a scrupulously fair man," began Florence sternly.

"Except where Spock is concerned." Jo looked worried. "Anything to do with Spock and Sarek's logic goes out to lunch. I mean really, definitely, several sandwiches short of the full picnic. When I was living with him and Amanda and going to the Medical School at the Science Academy, he was really impossible to be near after Spock announced that he was going to Gol. And after he left, Sarek was worse."

"Took it badly?"

"About as badly as you did, I'd say, Jim."

"Then I think that we are in trouble."

"Well worrying about it tonight is not going to help. I know it's early but I have to admit that I'm exhausted. I am going to bed; I may not sleep but I need to lie down for a while. You children can suit yourselves." Florence wasn't the least

bit tired but McCoy looked out on his feet.

The McCoy's exchanged looks and agreed that bed seemed a good move. "If I *have* got to face an angry Vulcan tomorrow I'd rather do it with a good night's sleep under my ear," said the senior McCoy.

Jo got up and heaved her father to his feet. "Is it all right if we come back for breakfast? We'd like to check up on Spock."

Jim made gasping noises. "Lord, a miracle!" he exclaimed. "A McCoy offering to make house calls."

"Good night, Jim."

The McCoy's trooped downstairs and checked up on their patient, who was snugly tucked up under a mound of bedclothes. They returned up the stairs murmuring medical opinions to each other, and finally pronounced themselves satisfied with his progress. "Temperature's up a little, but that could be because of him gallivanting around when he should have been resting. Good night!" said Jo and steered her father out of the door.

Florence and Jim called their good nights and watched the trundler move off.

"And what about you, Captain? Are you going to bed?"

"I'm not tired. I'll stay up for a while, if you don't mind?"

Florence considered him narrowly then flipped three computer squares onto the seat beside him.

"The codes are for the Academy and here, that'll take care of moving the trundler for you. The other is the lock on

the trundler. I've added your I.D. to the house alarm system so you'll be able to get back in whenever you want."

Jim grinned. "That obvious?"

"Just a logical deduction."

Jim's grin got a bit wider and he got up and kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks, Florence. See you in the morning."

"Night, Jim. Have a good time!"

Florence waited for another 15 minutes until a scratching at the window announced the return of Claudius. She roused herself, and let the cat in.

"There's food and drink for you in the kitchen, and Spock is asleep downstairs in one of the guest rooms. You just behave yourself and don't wake him up. You hear me?"

Claudius looked up at her, yawned widely, showing an impressive set of teeth and a long pink tongue, blinked, and ambled nonchalantly over to the circular stairs. Florence sighed and went to bed. Claudius was an attitude with a tail but he adored Vulcans. Florence knew where he'd be spending the night.

Joanna jabbed her father rather firmly in the ribs. "Anyone in there?"

"What? Are we here already? Do you have to keep jabbing me in the ribs?"

"Yes, and may I thank you for being such a charming and witty conversationalist on our journey. It made the time pass so quickly. What is it with you that directly you get into a trundler you go to sleep?"

McCoy senior flushed and

protested. "I was not asleep. I was thinking."

"Yeah, right." She stomped into the house, flicking on the lights as she went, heading for her bedroom.

"Jo? Jo, Please?"

Joanna McCoy stopped, tapped her foot several times, looked at the ceiling and then turned to look at her father.

"All this business with Spock and Sarek has made me think about us, and I met someone at the Ball tonight," he said.

"So did I. Do you mind, about?"

"Mind? Why should I mind? I just wanted to say that I'm sorry that I messed up your life, that I wasn't there for you when you needed me to be there."

"You know, I really hated you sometimes. You were so far away. But you did not mess up anything, except your own lives. Dad?" Joanna placed both hands on her father's shoulders. "You were always there for me when it mattered. When I got old enough to understand I knew that you loved me, no matter how far away from me you were. Besides, I think that you'd have made a rotten father."

The candid declaration startled McCoy.

"It's true, Dad. You're too good a doctor, too dedicated. You'd always have been too busy."

"Triacus," said Bones.

"What?"

"Not what, it's a where. A research colony. The kids said that their parents were always too busy."

"A sad feature of every child's life. Kids are very selfish creatures. They think they're the centre of the universe and that everything has to revolve around them and be the way they want it to be. I was a remarkably stubborn child. Can't say that I blame Mom for taking the professional advice and shipping me off to a residential school. I needed that amount of attention and discipline. For me it was the best solution; at least they could cope with me."

"All the reports I ever got said you were well adjusted - normal."

Jo laughed, "Dad, I was a holy terror. You'd have hated me, and I'd have hated you, and Mom. All things considered we've been lucky. We got by on all the difficult times and only let each other see the good bits. We survived my childhood and we still love each other. More importantly we're friends, and the extended family that I have now is so interesting!"

"Interesting. A cantankerous medic, a Starship Captain with delusions of godhood, a scientist who can't make up his mind what he is..."

"A linguist turned diplomat, a computer specialist turned Ambassador, a nonagenarian with the filthiest mind that I have ever encountered."

"A career diplomat with a talent for management and administration."

"At least you made me with love. Dad, you and Mom were too young. You were both brilliant, and you both had careers, and I made everything too complicated. Maybe you would have stayed together if I hadn't come along, but I did and you didn't and you don't blame me for that do you?"

"No. Of course not."

"Good, 'cause I don't blame you for not being together. I did, but I've grown up now and I've had to face that decision myself."

McCoy asked, "Who?"

"One of the doctors here on Avalon." Jo turned and walked a few paces then turned to face her father. "He's very sweet, and kind, and we enjoy each others company. A lot. I'm in the fast track, our family and my training have seen to that. I'm going to be moved on, different base, maybe a ship, and he won't be. He's happy here, and he's good at what he does. So I'm not going to make that mistake. At least not this time. I thought I'd better warn you because he's kind of old-fashioned and I think that he's going to ask your permission to marry me." The words trailed off into a half giggle.

McCoy closed his eyes. "It looks as if this shore leave is going to be one long round of marriage proposals. I'm going to bed."

"Dad? Would you mind if I didn't come with you tomorrow morning? I arranged to meet..."

"Sure, honey; good night."

McCoy climbed wearily into bed, turned out the lights and gazed up into the darkness, allowing the astonishing idea that had occupied his thoughts all the way from Florence's house to flow out of storage.

What if Florence was right? What if Spock stayed aboard the Enterprise because he didn't get bored there; because sometimes his merely Human companions/baby sitters didn't act in a predictable manner. By Spock's way of looking at life, not being bored would be a logical goal to pursue. And Sarek had

said that he'd married Amanda because at the time it was the logical thing to do. He'd have been around sixty or seventy when he'd made his 'logical decision', and Spock had turned adult at half that age, implying at the time that he'd been 'expecting to be spared this'.

Because of his hybrid origin? Or because he'd already passed the age when 'normal' Vulcan turned physically adult?

So if Sarek had turned adult at thirty or so and had married Amanda at sixty or so, then he'd had to have had previous partners, doubtless parting from them in the approved traditional manner.

Did that really mean that Sarek married Amanda because he was bored with the predictable Vulcan women he'd been married to; and that after the initial attraction had dimmed somewhat, Amanda was never able to bore him into leaving her?

McCoy smiled at himself for weaving such crazy notions from such slender evidence. It didn't really matter, not in the final summary, just why Sarek and Amanda had married. The inescapable fact was that they had stayed married, two people from, yes, alien cultures, for better than forty years, as a testament to the rightness of the original decision.

"And good luck to them," said McCoy. He smiled into the darkness, turned over, punched his pillow into a comfortable shape and slid gently away into a peaceful sleep filled with dreams of little winged hammers flitting hummingbird fashion about a forest filled with flowers, knocking gently on the furled petals for admittance.

The objects of McCoy's musings

were inbound to Avalon aboard a diplomatic shuttle, due to arrive at Avalon in time to attend Spock's wedding. They were not enjoying such a peaceful rest. Sarek roused himself from his nightmare of burning to find himself standing a metre from the foot of his bed being regarded with loving patience by his wife, who was sitting up, her arms wrapped about her knees.

"I woke you. I apologise," he said thickly.

"I think that you were having a nightmare," observed Amanda.

"Vulcans do not dream."

"There is an eight letter word to describe what I think of that statement, and it is not 'nonsense!'"

Sarek's eyes flickered about the room, searching for something amongst the sparse furnishings of the little ship's main cabin. "I thought that there was a fire, and that I was trapped."

"Sarek. Sarek?" Amanda waited until her husband looked at her and then patted the bed that he had left so precipitately. "There is a fire," she said gently. "We will share it together, just as we always do."

Sarek shook his head, then turned his attention inwards and assessed his condition. Alarm made his voice shake ever so slightly. "There should not be, not now. You know that I monitor the situation most carefully."

Amanda patted the bed again and Sarek retreated back to its haven, the Terran style bed covers and pillows a comforting luxury provided, supposedly, for Amanda.

Amanda cuddled up to him, her

body fitting comfortably against his. "How long do we have, my wife?" he murmured.

"Not long enough," was the unexpected reply, and he turned his head to look at her.

"You know that I love you. Yes, my dear, I know that love is not logical. Even Humans know that! I do love you though, and it's very important to me to know that you know it; that I will be here for you for as long as you want me to be here."

"I would not want another for my wife."

"One day you'll have to consider that. I'm not going to live forever."

Sarek sat up abruptly. "You will not speak of this again."

"Yes I will," contradicted Amanda calmly. "I will speak of it again and again until I am sure that you have considered the prospect of another woman in your life and have accepted it. I'm only Human, Sarek; I'll turn old long before you will, and when I'm not here for you I want to be sure that there will be someone else to look after you. To not let you be alone."

Sarek shivered. "Spock is alone. Even when he was betrothed to T'Pring he was alone. He is alone now, waiting for T'Prilia. I do not understand why T'Pau arranged for her to be his mate."

Amanda sat up and draped an arm about Sarek's back, noting almost absently the carefully maintained musculature. "You could speak to Spock before the ceremony takes place. You could talk to him and make sure that T'Pau's choice is acceptable to him. If it is not there is plenty of time to get him back

to Vulcan and to find a proper mate for him."

"That would be against Tradition."

"I hadn't noticed too much adherence to Tradition going on where Spock's marriage is concerned," muttered Amanda, collapsing back against the pillows.

There was a long, friendly pause, filled with the silence of the Federation Ambassador from Vulcan engaged in profound thought.

"I ignored Tradition when I married you," he announced.

"It was the logical thing to do at the time."

There was another period of silence then.

"I attempted to compensate for my actions by forcing Spock to excel in everything, to prove that I had not behaved illogically." Sarek sounded almost puzzled, as if this thought had not occurred to him before, which it had not.

Amanda smiled wryly. "You certainly succeeded in producing a perfect Vulcan. He can figure out a logical reason for doing absolutely anything that he wants to!"

"You are teasing me!"

"I'm agreeing with you," corrected Amanda.

Sarek lay back onto the bed and Amanda peered anxiously at him as he said, "You have agreed with me too often. Even at those times when you knew that my actions were incorrect, you still agreed with me."

"Of course. I'm your wife. It's the Vulcan way for a wife to agree with her husband."

Sarek considered this statement then said, "I think I would prefer it if you disagreed with me sometimes."

"I was just doing so, Sarek."

Sarek reached out and gently drew his wife to him, cradling her against him. "You were disagreeing with me over something which affected my welfare. You never do so as insistently over anything else. You may have expressed an opinion, but when you have discovered that my opinion was different you have always deferred to my wishes. I think that in future I would prefer you to maintain your own opinions, and disagree with me."

Amanda chuckled. "I can just imagine it. There you are in the Council, in full flow, and I potter up to you and say, 'Sorry, dear, but I think you're wrong about that'. The Council would love it."

"You would not do so, but in other things, Family matters, I would know your true opinions. I want you to not always just agree with me. It is not right that you should do so. You think that I should speak with Spock, about his marriage to T'Prilia?"

"Yes I do. I checked her out when the request from Spock first arrived. She is from an impeccable Family, and as an alliance it would be advantageous, but she is ... not rational where Starfleet is involved. Her first mate was killed on the Intrepid. I ... I fear that Spock is not being presented with a fair choice. What if there are conditions made about which we know nothing? Why did T'Pau pick her when there were others far more suitable, women with scientific training

who were willing to join Spock aboard the Enterprise? And to hold the ceremony here on Avalon... Solen is here, and his family is with him. He's teaching at the Starfleet Academy. I fear a repetition of the first mating." She stopped as suddenly as she had begun.

Sarek's eyebrows rose as the flood of words burst from Amanda and he hugged her closer, revelling in the knowledge (as he always did), that his choice had been so right for them. "I accept that there is much which could be questioned. I will go to The Refuge when we arrive at Avalon and I will speak with Spock about these matters. If I find that he is in any way dissatisfied with the woman selected for him by T'Pau I will support him in rejecting T'Prilia, and will travel with him to Vulcan to arrange a match of his choosing. And you will come too. It is, after all, the duty of a Vulcan mother to oversee such matters, and I have kept you from your duties for too long."

Amanda smiled and wriggled a little closer, "I foresee a busy time ahead, while I attend to all my Traditional duties."

"Yes," stated Sarek.

BOXING DAY

A hissing squall, overlaid by some rich but rather incomprehensible oaths, informed Florence that her Terran guest was, at last, awake. A furry figure appeared at the doorway, looked up at her and enquired, "Mrrmr?"

"Good morning to you. Thank you for waking Jim up. It saved me the problem of getting down and up those pesky stairs."

Florence reached down carefully and placed a dish of food on the floor next to the dish of water already in place. "I don't know whether you are hungry or not but I suppose that you won't object to a snack."

The little creature regarded her for a long minute, then gliding forwards performed its figure of eight around her ankles and proceeded to pay delicate attention to the food.

"What *is* that thing?" demanded Kirk.

Florence looked at the rumpled figure in the askew pyjamas and dressing gown with real appreciation. The spick and span Captain of the night before looked heavy-eyed and dishevelled, his trousers were slipping and his jacket, open nearly to the waist, showed an expanse of perfectly smooth tanned chest now marred by four little scratches, the edges of which were beaded with tiny droplets of blood.

"Your chest is leaking," said Florence, with what she thought was commendable restraint.

Kirk dabbed at himself, then glared down at the inflictor of his wounds. "I woke up to find that thing on my chest."

"Claudius must have been surprised to find you in the guest room. He's made downstairs his territory."

"His? Oh. Right. What did you call it?"

"Claudius."

Kirk shuffled forwards and peered down at the cat who stopped licking at a dainty paw to return his regard with interest.

Kirk blinked under the baleful assault, then frowned. "Its eyes?"

"One blue, one green. It is an unusual effect, isn't it?" She handed Kirk a glass of fruit juice and he muttered an absent-minded, "Thanks. I didn't know that you had a cat?"

"It's a matter of debate amongst cat feeders as to whether they own the cat or the cat owns them. Claudius and I have worked out an operational understanding. He doesn't scratch me and in return I feed him whenever he turns up."

"A roamer, is he?" Kirk hitched up his trousers and perched on a convenient stool.

"I think he thinks he's a sabretoothed tiger. I don't have the heart to tell him that he's not."

The subject of their discussion started on his other front paw. Kirk rubbed his face sleepily then ran his fingers through his hair, only managing to muss it more thoroughly. "If he's anything like the cats my Mom used to have on the farm it won't be any use you telling him. He isn't going to believe you. Their attitude always seemed to be, 'Oh yeah? Possibly. Put it in writing and mail it to me.'"

"I'd noticed that," agreed Florence.

"As long as he doesn't claw Spock. He's still asleep - I checked. He looks a bit feverish."

"Did our family physician mention fever?"

"Not a word. In fact he said that Spock shouldn't show any ill effects from last night's collapse other than a certain lassitude."

"A certain... He means Spock should sleep a lot?"

"That's the way I translated it. He... Argh!"

Kirk glared at the tail end of Claudius as he whisked out of sight into the lounge, then bent to examine his left foot, drawing it up to rest across his right thigh.

"He bit me!" Kirk announced indignantly. "That cat bit me!"

"I won't worry about it. I'm sure that you haven't got anything contagious." Florence bent over and looked at the slight reddening around the smallest toe as Kirk closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Have you no respect?" he asked.

"Respect?"

"Yes!"

"No."

"I think I realised that."

Florence patted his cheek. "One day, when you're all grown up, you'll realise that respect is something that people accord to all sorts of people for the strangest reasons, whether they deserve it or not." She followed Claudius into the living room.

Kirk sighed. He'd been awake barely ten minutes and he'd already been attacked, twice, by a cat, and insulted, in the politest way, by his host. "Can I go back to bed, please?" He asked the empty kitchen. "Days like this can only ever get worse!"

"Jim!"

Kirk sighed again, eased himself off the kitchen stool, hitched up his trousers and shambled, flat-footedly, into the living room.

"Yes, Florence?"

"I don't know whether you're awake enough to be interested but there are five calls for you on the system and they're all from Jerry Weston. He wants to talk to you. He says that you've turned your communicator off. He sounds... a tad peeved."

"Peeved?"

"How about irritated?"

Kirk yawned, slightly less elegantly than Claudius.

"How about blazing mad? What did you do at the Ball last night, Cinders?"

"Do? Me? I didn't do anything much. Just danced, and... stuff." Kirk slumped into the chair by the terminal and Florence keyed in the access codes. The image on the screen resolved itself into the face of Weston's harried Staff Ensign, who showed every sign of relief when he recognised the caller to be the illustrious and absent Captain Kirk.

"Good morning, sir," he said brightly.

"Not yet it isn't, Ensign, not by a long, long way. I understand that Captain Weston wants to talk to me?"

"Yes, sir. He's very eager to do so. I'll connect you."

"Ominous!" murmured Florence.

"Kirk!" Weston's voice thundered out of the speakers. "You've pulled some stunts on me in the past but this time

you've gone too far!"

"Pardon?"

"Don't play the bewildered innocent with me. I've seen the act before, remember? I don't care what you and those two lunatic officers of yours get up too but I sincerely object to you dragging my Dolores into your games. You get your ass into my office now. I'll have a transbeam set up for five minutes time."

"Better make in ten, Jerry, I've got to do some first-aid to him first. Rood out."

Florence switched off the connection and said, "I'll say this for you, Jimboy, you certainly know how to keep a girl entertained. I haven't had so much fun since my grandson brought home an Argellian mouselet."

"An Argellian mouselet?" asked Jim, trying to figure out how it was involved with what was going on.

"Just the one. He thought she was cute; so had the male mouselet. She had babies. We never got round to counting them so we didn't miss the odd few that got out. Their descendants turn up all over the place. Even built a nest in the navigation console in the 'Fleet simulator. It blew out in the middle of the exams. Hadn't you better get dressed? The mood Jerry's in he'll have you beamed out of here in whatever you're almost wearing."

Kirk attempted to finger comb his hair. "I thought you were going to do some first aid?"

Florence peered at his chest, considering the tiny wounds, then drew the edges of his jacket together. "I think you'll survive. Better hustle."

Kirk hustled, and scrambled into a set of casual clothing, promising himself

that as soon as he could arrange it he was going to put some time aside to rethink his command technique. Something had certainly gone missing. He shoved various essential articles into the pockets of the loose jacket. Technically, as he had been summoned by a senior officer, he should have worn a uniform, but he most emphatically did not like the current design, which showed any and all excess ounces and did not have any useful pockets. He just wished that the people who had designed the new uniform had had to wear the thing, but he knew that the designers were not members of Starfleet. There again, the female crew preferred the new uniform, stating that they could live on a permanent diet if it got rid of the short skirts which had left them over-exposed on landing party details.

He paused, then gently pushed open the door to Spock's room. An unfamiliar sound greeted him and he pushed the door open further, allowing the light to illuminate the figure in the bed, or rather the two figures. Spock was still curled up under the covers but somehow the curve seemed a trifle less urgent, some of the tension seemed to be missing. Kirk regarded the furball on the pillow next to Spock's head with grave disfavour, but Claudius didn't deign to notice the command glare directed at him. The cat was purring, gently rubbing his head and chin against the back of Spock's head, a look of blissful feline ecstasy transfiguring the haughty indifference exhibited in the kitchen into a look of abject adoration. Kirk grinned wryly then said softly,

"Hey, Claudius!"

To his surprise the little cat stopped and looked at him.

"Don't wake him up, and no biting or clawing him, understand?"

Claudius blinked, blue and green, tilted his head as if considering the proposal, then resumed his purring and gentle head rubbing. Kirk closed the door, then reopened it to leave a gap for Claudius and ran lightly up the spiral staircase into the living room. Florence was sitting in a chair by the window, the early morning sunlight flooding in to warm her, her hands cupped around a mug of steaming fragrant chocolate. Kirk's nostrils twitched as the inviting smell hit them, and his stomach rumbled loudly. He tried to ignore its message.

"Spock's still asleep. Claudius is in there with him; I think he likes Spock."

Having heard every word Kirk had addressed to her pet, Florence just nodded. "Spock is a Vulcan, Claudius is a cat. Claudius will therefore find Spock irresistible."

"Perhaps we should try Claudius out on Sarek," suggested Kirk as he crossed the room in four swift strides, dropped a kiss onto Florence's cheek and left as swiftly.

"Trying the charm method now, Kirk? If I were sixty years younger it might have worked but that cat doesn't jump now, unfortunately."

Outside Kirk took several deep breaths of the crisp morning air before he pulled out his communicator and turned it on.

"Kirk to Avalon Control?"

The response was immediate. "Receiving you, Captain. Are you ready for transbeaming?"

"That impatient, is he?"

"With respect, sir, you'll be gone in a few more days; we have to stay here

and report to him."

"Noted, Avalon Control. Ready for transbeam."

The beam swept him up as he finished talking.

He paced around his office, fuming and venting his temper by kicking the furniture. This didn't hurt because Dolores Weston had ensured that all her husband's office furniture was of a type which allowed him to kick it without hurting his feet, and it did make him feel a little better. He continued pacing and kicking, unaware that his Staff Ensign of the moment, and his Security Chief, were monitoring his progress through the just open door. The very young ensign kept on swallowing nervously until the Chief leant over and whispered in his ear.

"You swallow much more air and I'm going to have to burp you, boy."

The aide's reply was interrupted by the call signal from the Comms. Unit.

"Isn't he here YET!" bellowed Jerry Weston, clearly audible through the open door as well as the speaker.

The Chief tapped the ensign's shoulder and held up four fingers.

"E.T.A. is four minutes, sir."

"I want to see him immediately. Understand?"

"Yes." The click of the terminated connection sounded loudly. "Sir."

The Chief patted his shoulder encouragingly. "You're doing just fine, son."

"Am I?"

"Sure you are. The Boss has never had an aide like you. First off you interrupt his dinner with Captain Kirk, who vanishes and hasn't been back since, and now you foul up a simple Comms. message relay with Starfleet H.Q."

Knowing the accuracy, if not the justice, of the first accusation, the young man retorted, "I did not foul up any Comms. message."

"You don't mean to tell me that you think they're accurate?"

"I checked the message verification and asked for duplicate messages to be sent, and that was before the Boss asked me to." The youngster was indignant and it showed.

"Whatever." The Chief shrugged and wandered away to look at the office planters. Three minutes later the outer door opened and a man dressed in civilian clothes walked in. The Chief eyed him appraisingly. The rogue was still handsome, she had to admit. Even in civilian clothes there was still something which marked him out. The flashy arrogance she had seen in action on the Enterprise four years previously had long gone. In its place was a smoother, more mature attractiveness which was even more appealing, and the Kirk smile was still as devastating.

"Morning, Ensign. I believe that Captain Weston wants to speak to me?"

"Yes, sir," replied the long-suffering aide. "Immediately."

"Get your ass in here, Kirk!" Weston roared from the inner office, and with another vintage grin and a rueful shrug Kirk obeyed, shutting the door firmly behind him.

"I know he does that deliberately," muttered the Chief.

"Pardon, sir?"

"Nothing important. Carry on, and if you get any more strange messages from Starfleet Central, well, just keep checking them out."

The Chief whipped out of the office before the ensign could reply. She moved smartly through the Administration office, bent on reaching the Security Section in the shortest possible time. Dominic St. John Lucius Cavendish may have been well and truly lumbered with an ancestral heritage which had resulted in his diffident character but there was nothing wrong with the child's brain. In fact, with the judicious application of a little pressure the lad could show definite promise. Who knew? In twenty years time, if he lived that long and got the right sort of experience, he could be a Starship Captain. She wondered what the Klingons would make of his name; they had enough trouble with the great J.T.K.

She burst into the Security Section and issued a stream of orders. She stood in the centre of the Security Communications Room tapping her foot and chewing furiously on her lip. Something was brewing, she knew it; she could feel the force of something building up in the atmosphere, and she didn't know what it was. Not exactly. It was obviously something to do with Kirk and the Enterprise crew, and the silly messages coming out of H.Q., and, possibly, the Vulcans who were now assembling at The Refuge, but for the life of her she couldn't see how they all fitted together. She didn't know what was going on and that made her nervous; and that, in turn, caused her staff to examine their consciences most carefully for any sins of omission or commission.

As Kirk closed the door Weston rounded the desk and almost screamed, "How in Hannigan's Nine Hells do you do it?"

Biting back some instinctively undiplomatic answers Kirk managed to ask mildly, "Do what, Jerry?"

"Do what, Jerry?" mimicked Weston savagely. "Oh my stars! Jim, your little boy innocent act hasn't fooled me since the day at the Academy when you mysteriously lost your singing voice and I got lumbered with doing your solo at the end of year concert."

Kirk smiled reminiscently. "But you did it so well."

"Hah! I nearly failed my second year exams because of the bedamned choir!"

"I nearly failed my firsts! Why else do you think I had to get out?"

"Your timing stank!"

"On the contrary, my timing was excellent." Kirk radiated insufferable smugness.

Weston drew a deep breath. "Well since then, Jimmy, you have definitely lost it. I don't know just how you manage to conjure chaos and insanity in Fleet H.Q. when you're here on Avalon but I'm glad to say that I am going to dump the whole lot into your lap, and welcome!"

Kirk listened to growing bewilderment to the tirade. "H.Q.?" he ventured as Weston paused to breathe. He'd expected the trouble to originate from The Refuge, not Starfleet H.Q.

"YES H.Q. Star Fleet Central has gone nuts! Here is the first of their idiot messages."

Jerry scabbled at some printed sheets on his desk and tossed one at Kirk. It flipped in the air and glided down to land on the cushioned carpet. Kirk stooped and paused, half bent over as his eyes scanned across the script.

"What?" he breathed, straightening up to look at Weston in astonishment.

"As you can plainly see that message is from our venerated Admiral Nogura informing MY WIFE that she is appointed as Science Officer to the Enterprise. Effective today."

"Thanks, but I've already got a Science Officer, a good one, and I'm keeping him."

"I know. Two hours after that one arrived, this one dropped onto my head." Weston waved the sheet. "This rescinds that one. I get to keep my wife here on Avalon, thank you so very much, and you get a dependency posting with BOTH of yours. Tell me. What convoluted chain of seemingly random events has caused you to decide to get married to your Science Officer and your Chief Medical Officer?"

"What?" repeated Kirk faintly, paling.

"This is a notice, a formal declaration of marriage having been received by Starfleet H.Q. from the persons concerned, announcing the same, to the effect that the following personnel are deemed to have a dependency bonding, and shall only be posted to the same location and/or vessel. James Tiberius Kirk, Leonard Horatio McCoy, Spock of Vulcan."

Kirk snapped out of his mental paralysis and snatched the sheet from Weston's grasp to read it for himself.

"Oh S***!" he moaned. "How did they find out?"

"You mean it's true?" Weston's voice peaked into the soprano range.

"Yes. I mean no. That is, not exactly," Kirk stammered.

Weston sat down weakly, as if his legs were about to give way. "Why me?" he asked the light fittings. "What did I do to deserve this as a Christmas present?"

"Er... Did you get the validity of the coding on these messages checked?" asked Kirk, after a longish pause.

"Young Dom did. They are authentic. We've sent off for duplicate transmissions in the hope that someone in H.Q. will realise that someone in Admiral Nogura's office has been afflicted with a death wish, although judging from your reaction, I'm going to be disappointed, aren't I?"

"Probably. Could I have a cup of coffee?"

"The drinks cabinet is behind you."

"Banned. It'll react with the drugs I'm taking." Kirk busied himself with the coffee pot.

"Drugs? Jim, you are going to have to tell me what is going on; and I don't mean that farradiddle about a sick Vulcan."

"There isn't a lot to tell."

"You get married to two men, at the same time, and there isn't a lot to tell? I know that you have the most over-rated reputation this side of the galactic centre, but honestly."

Kirk handed him a cup of coffee and

sat down. "I didn't get married, nobody did. No, that isn't true. Nobody from the Enterprise got married, to each other or anybody else."

At the frown gathering on Weston's brow Kirk hurried on. "Some of Spock's family may have got the impression that Spock got married to us, me and McCoy."

"Oh! That would tend to explain it."

"Explain what?"

"The Vulcan who showed up at The Refuge."

Vulcans were always at The Refuge. It was the Vulcan haven on Avalon. The place to escape to where the lunacy and illogic of their Federation allies could be excluded and ignored for a while. From Jerry's tone Kirk inferred that this Vulcan was special. He sat up. "Vulcan? What Vulcan?"

"I have to admit that the Security Team didn't get 'round to formal introductions."

"Jerry!" exclaimed Kirk, the urgency in his voice plain.

"He must have had a Security clearance to get in there because he got cleared by all the Security sensors. The Team called it in because he left a short time later and they said, and I quote, 'He looked angry', unquote. Don't look so worried. The Security shield is still over Doctor Rood, and by definition Spock. I sent out another Team to camp on the McCoys when that second idiot message arrived."

Kirk relaxed a fraction. "Thanks for that. I wish the Team had got an I.D. on him. I'd like to know which of Spock's family has shown up first."

"Well if it's any help this one was tall, muscular, had grey hair and dark grey eyes and was wearing diplomatic ribbons."

Kirk slumped, a cold feeling growing in his stomach. "Distinguished?"

"Handsome in an austere way; shiploads of presence' was the description the Team used."

Kirk took a deep breath. "I'm very much afraid that I do know him." He got up and crossed the room to the Comms terminal, flipping the switches to the domestic bands, and slipped in the tab for Florence's house. The screen brightened and the connection made even as Weston started to protest.

"Hi, Florence. I think that we have an immediate problem."

Florence grinned back from the screen. "I know. He's already arrived."

"Hell. Are you all right?"

"Oh I'm fine. He's very anxious to see you, and McCoy. He implied that if your head was on a tray, decorated and glazed with an apple in your mouth... He didn't actually say that but I'm sure your imagination will fill in the details."

Kirk sighed. "I have a very good imagination."

"He doesn't seem to be all that interested in Bones. Only you. You should be flattered."

"I'm more likely to be flattened."

"No. No. He won't lay a finger on you," Florence assured him soothingly. "You married his son, remember?"

"You didn't tell him that? Did you?"

Kirk had the sudden, quite horrifying vision that Florence had actually done precisely that.

"No." Florence seemed quite sad to have to make the admission that she'd passed on the spectacular opportunity. "I just told him that he was behaving emotionally and he calmed down immediately. He's waiting here to see you. Spock had had some calls and had already gone off somewhere; he said that he'll be back later."

"I'll be back as soon as I can."

"No need to hurry. I can handle things here. You just take care of whatever it is that young Jerry wanted you for, and I'll take care of things here." Florence winked and broke the connection.

"How did he get out to Florence's so fast, and why didn't the Security people stop him?"

"Transporter," said Kirk absently, his mind churning over the possibilities "And the chances are your Security people recognised him."

"They don't have a transporter at The Refuge that'll handle that sort of cross-country hop."

Kirk smiled gently, the sort of smile that usually sent his officers, with the exception of Spock, running for cover. "Why don't you check the recently arrived ships. If I'm not mistaken you'll find the Vulcan diplomatic courier Surak is in orbit."

"Why the Surak?"

"That's the one that Sarek usually uses."

"Sarek? THE Sarek? THAT Sarek?"

"Spock's father."

Weston went paler than Kirk had done then went to the drinks cabinet and poured himself a stiff one. He gulped down half. "Fine. Great. I don't mind being intimidated by the good guys. I'm sure that he's got a really good reason to be peeved at you, marrying his son could well be it, but would you mind telling me what we do next?"

"Next? Next we find Amanda."

"Amanda? Who is Amanda?"

"Spock's mother. Sarek's wife." Kirk amplified.

"Your mother-in-law."

"I guess it depends on your point of view."

"WHAT!"

In the outer office Dom tried very hard to carry on with his assigned duties but the bursts of muffled shouting coming from Captain Weston's office were a serious threat to his concentration. After one clearly audible exchange he placed his stylus carefully on the desk, leaned on his elbows and, cupping his face in his hands, sighed unhappily.

"I entirely agree."

He gulped, stood and turned in one movement, his hand reaching instinctively for the small phaser clipped to his belt in a purely reflex action brought about by the voice sounding out in what he thought was an office empty of everyone but him. He froze half crouched, hand gripping the phaser and pointing it at the speaker before he was really aware of what his body was doing. The speaker stood quite still and looked

at him without apparent concern.

"I do apologise. I should not have startled you," she said calmly.

Dominic St. John Lucius Cavendish looked at the lady, took in the folds of the elegant pastel gown, the discrete jewellery at wrists and neck, and the decidedly humorous twinkle in her ash grey eyes, and said, equally calmly,

"No, you shouldn't have. Can I help you?" He didn't lower the phaser.

The lady smiled gravely. "I was looking for my husband. I was worried that he might have come here looking for Captain Kirk."

Her eyes flicked towards the closed door from behind which muffled voices could be heard. A delicate, and carefully empty, hand gestured. "Would he be in there?"

"No, that's Captain Kirk with Captain Weston."

The slight expression of concern cleared from the lady's face. "Oh what a relief. For a minute I dared to think that he... But then he wouldn't... At least he never has before... I need to speak to Captain Kirk quite urgently. May I go in?"

"I think I'd better announce you. Ma'am?"

The lady nodded, opening her mouth, and for a split second he thought that it was she who had called out, "WHAT?"

The ensign straightened and looked at the still closed door to Jerry Weston's office. The lady stepped up to stand beside him, her greying hair level with his shoulder. "Is it supposed to be

soundproof?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh. In that case..." She seemed to reach the door without moving from his side and had opened it, announcing, "Good Morning," in a sweet but firm voice before he could react.

Later he blessed his instinctive palming of his phaser; not even Captain Weston in a good mood could have excused him letting a small, singularly unhostile lady get by him if he'd actually seen the weapon unholstered, and Weston was not in a good mood. As it was he managed to reach the lady's side and blurt out, "I'm sorry, sir," before he took in the altogether wondrous sight of Captain James Tiberius Kirk looking at the lady. As Kirk was seated in one of the massive office armchairs and had turned to peer over the top of the chairback at the unheralded entry, the only part of him that could be seen was the top of his head, and two eyes which held an expression which Dominic could only think of as barely suppressed panic.

Jerry Weston took pity on the floundering ensign (he hadn't seen the phaser) and said, "It's all right, Dom. It's just going to be one of those days."

"Captain Weston, I am sorry to interrupt your meeting, but I came here looking for my husband; I was informed that he might be coming here, to see Captain Kirk."

Weston took in her poised air of amusement, and Kirk's shattered immobility, and rose magnificently to the occasion, so elevating himself considerably in Dom's eyes; he'd previously thought of him as capable but bland.

"Good morning. Would your

husband be a rather tall, muscular, grey haired gentleman with a very distinguished air who was at The Refuge a little earlier?"

"Very probably."

Kirk rose to his feet. "I can explain, Amanda."

Amanda surveyed him from head to foot. "I'm depending on that. Quite frankly, and with the best will in the worlds, you are not my first choice as daughter-in-law."

Dominic was granted a second wondrous sight as James Tiberius Kirk, interstellar legend, blushed a vivid scarlet. Then Weston noticed that he was still present and dismissed him, closing the door firmly on him.

Thwarted, Dominic went back to his desk, considered all that had happened so far and thoughtfully fed into his desk console a request for information about the parents of Commander Spock. The next of kin file was most helpful. His accurate assumptions were rewarded by a somewhat lengthy resume of Ambassador Sarek's varied and illustrious career, and an equally lengthy (and somewhat unexpected) resume of the Lady Amanda's many accomplishments. Clearing the screen he leaned back in his chair and directed an exultant grin at the door of the now silent office.

He had been given a valuable lesson, one that would stand him in good stead. Rank undoubtedly had its privileges but, equally undoubtedly, it also brought with it a crop of problems of commensurate difficulty. Pledging never to interfere with the delicate sensibilities of diplomatically inclined Vulcans, Dominic bent back to his assigned duties. No matter what else was going on, Captain Weston would still expect the

normal business of his office to be completed on time and accurately.

Solen reacted with a pardonable surge of panic when his assistant informed him that Sarek of Vulcan had arrived at The Refuge and was asking to speak with his son. The idea of explaining to such a personage that, once again, his son and heir had been rejected by his agreed bride drove the colour from his face and the wits from his head. He found that his fingers were trembling as he tried to dress, and that he couldn't stop the tremors. Illogically he wished that he was somewhere, anywhere, other than where he was, and that he didn't have to face Sarek to tell him that there would be no wedding.

He left his room and came face to face with his daughter, who wasted no time in the traditional morning exchange of greetings.

"Sarek is waiting downstairs," she said. "You are going to talk with him."

"If I could avoid it I would, but as you have again left this Family in a very precarious position I have no options left to me other than to attempt to explain to him what happened this time."

T'Pring tilted her head. "Have you not heard, Father? There are always possibilities; the fact that they are not currently known to you does not preclude their existence."

Solen fought against a shudder of apprehension. "What do you mean?"

"I have been thinking. I do it very well, you remember that, don't you?"

"I remember that if it hadn't been for you Challenging we would not have

incurred the displeasure of the House of Surak and would not have been assigned to this planet."

"How would you like to be posted back to Vulcan?"

"Another of your schemes?" The wariness in the voice brought a glint to T'Pring's eyes.

"A continuation of the same one. When you meet with Sarek to tell him that his son is not here do not mention the marriage of Stonn to T'Prilia."

"Do you think to conceal it?"

"Of course not." There was scorn in T'Pring's voice and impatience too. "Listen to me. Last night Spock tried to lie to me. He failed - he has no talent for deception - but it served to allow me the opportunity to cause some annoyances to his Thy'la. We can use this. When you see Sarek merely tell him that Spock has taken as mates his Thy'la."

Solen looked at T'Pring with visible distaste. "That is a lie."

"Yes. Spock's lie. I sent word of it to Starfleet and they have reacted in their typical foolish fashion. They have established a dependency posting for Spock and his outworlders. When Sarek questions your information about Spock and his mates you will reply that a dependency posting has already been established by Starfleet. Do not elaborate on this information, just state it as a fact, which it is. Then state that T'Pau has called for a Family Council to take place here, at planetary noon, to discuss the situation."

"She has called it to discuss with Spock..."

"His future plans," interrupted

T'Pring firmly. "Precisely what Sarek wishes to do. If we can just make Sarek angry enough..."

"Sarek is an Ambassador."

"Sarek is a man. And like his son, he is in a very interesting condition at the moment. I have two opportunities for marriage now, the son or the father."

With growing dismay Solen listened to his daughter's words. "You can not disrupt his marriage to the Lady Amanda."

T'Pring looked at her father, wondering again if such a bland man could really have sired her. "If the Lady Amanda decides to reject him, and she may well do that, then he will have to have someone to turn to, won't he? And if she doesn't reject him then there is still Spock, whose condition is still interesting. Now go down to Sarek and say exactly what I have told you to say. I am tired of being exiled to this damp, miserable place. There is nothing here for me to do except read the reports of others doing the work that I should be doing; I want to go home!"

Solen turned, obedient to the command, and went downstairs to the starkly furnished reception room that held his nemesis. For all of his life Sarek had been held up as an example to him and his peers. Even the outrageous marriage to the outworlder had not diminished the regard that the Council of Vulcan had for him. The birth of an heir to the misalliance had only strengthened the hold of the House of Surak on the Council of Vulcan, where it had been hailed as another example of IDIC. The marriage of his daughter to the half breed would have placed him in a position of some power, but T'Pring had decided otherwise, preferring Stonn, her lover of many years.

Solen paused at the door, then pushed it open, his decision made. T'Pring was scheming again, and there was nothing that he could do to prevent her doing so, he had learned that lesson many years before. Now she was meddling with the lives of the very highest, and she might succeed, in which case he would benefit, or she might fail, in which case she would be blamed, not him. Everyone knew that he was no schemer, merely a pawn; there were worse places in the universe than Avalon, which would be considerably more tolerable if T'Pring was not living in his household. Face bland, but with his stomach churning with apprehension, he raised his hand to Sarek and gave the traditional greeting.

The interview lasted for a few fraught minutes then Sarek left, his anger barely contained. Solen sank thankfully into a chair, shaken by the volatile emotions that had been caused by his information and which heralded the immediacy of Pon Farr. He looked up as T'Pring entered.

"If this goes wrong!" he warned.

"How can it 'go wrong'? They are both out of control; it only needs for them to lose their tempers with each other before T'Pau during the Council here and I will have my way. I take it he has gone to confront Spock at Doctor Rood's house?"

"Yes."

"I thought that he might. Spock is not there, neither are his Thy'la. Only the old woman, who is less than diplomatic and who should agitate Sarek further. I suggest that you rest before the Family Council. It could prove to be a tiring occasion."

Florence Rood took one look at the thunderous expression on Sarek's face and flinched. As Jo had warned, the Vulcan was definitely missing several sandwiches.

"I wish to speak with Spock."

Florence could almost hear the boulders grinding together in the flood of Sarek's anger.

"He's not here at the moment, but I expect that he'll be back soon. Won't you come in and wait for him?"

"Are Kirk or McCoy here?"

"Again, no, but they'll be back too. Come in, Sarek."

Florence stood back and Sarek stalked in, looking around as if expecting to find the three people that he wanted to talk with present. Florence felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise as Claudius spat angrily at Sarek, the fur on the lithe body fluffing out as the cat reacted to his presence. Claudius backed under a chair, hissing out a warning.

"Sarek, who have you been talking to?"

At first there was no response then Sarek said, "Solen."

Florence sniffed loudly. "That half life? Just what did he say that's got you so fired up?"

Sarek swung ponderously round to face her.

"You are acting in a very emotional manner. Now why don't you sit down, do some deep breathing and calm down. Then we'll talk like the sensible, rational people that we are."

For long seconds that stretched to an eternity their gazes locked then Sarek looked away. "I show emotion. I apologise."

"I suspect that the cause would be more than sufficient, if it were true, but knowing Solen I have a real strong feeling that you've been fed some wide lies, so please sit down and do as I suggest."

Sarek lowered himself into an armchair, his robes folding neatly about him, and bent his head over steepled hands.

The chime of the Comms. unit gained Florence's gratitude as it allowed her to withdraw and let Sarek have some privacy.

After the short discussion with Jim Kirk, during which she lied manfully about the extent of the problem which was occupying her living room, she remained sitting at the Comms. terminal, waiting. She didn't know quite how to gauge the extent of Sarek's rage or how long it would take him to calm down. Claudius provided the answer for her by emerging from his retreat and jumping up into Sarek's lap, purring loudly. Sarek gathered up the cat, his long fingers stroking just the right places.

"Is it safe to talk to you now?" ventured Florence.

"I apologise."

"You already have. Can we talk? Discuss matters?" persisted Florence.

"I regret that I can not discuss this with you."

"It's not a matter that can be discussed with outworlders, I know. Okay, I'll talk and you listen. When I met

Spock he was on his way to The Refuge. I gave him a lift there, and on arrival he collapsed, on the lawn. He didn't even make it inside."

Florence rattled the words out before Sarek could say anything else. His hands stilled and Claudius wriggled unhappily, trying to get the wonderful sensations started again. The fingers moved again, but in a very mechanical fashion. Florence had succeeded in gaining Sarek's full attention.

"I wanted to get help for him but he... begged me not to go to The Refuge, not to let the Vulcans there take him in. He'd arrived in the middle of a wedding ceremony, for Stonn and T'Prilia."

Sarek stiffened. "Are you certain that those names are correct?"

"Those are the ones that Spock stated to me. I brought Spock back here rather than take him to the Medical Centre. I realised what was wrong with him, you see."

Sarek's head rose slowly and he gazed at her, eyes narrowing as the implications of her statement of knowledge resounded in the sudden silence.

She twitched a smile at him. "Surely you remember how nosey I am? And I do know an awful lot about computers. I had plenty of time to rummage about in the Academy's computer banks."

Sarek nodded. "I must remember to advise the Academy to increase security blocks against unauthorised access to the medical files."

Florence didn't comment. She had tapped into the Medical Centre's computer storage but the information

there had been too technical for her to understand. The most useful details had been acquired when she'd burgled the storage used by the History and Archaeology units.

"Do you want me to continue?" she ventured.

Sarek nodded.

"McCoy and Kirk came here, and so did Joanna McCoy. Your family physicians diagnosed the problem and gave him a time limit of sixteen hours maximum before Plak Tow was due to hit. This proved to be a vast overestimate because T'Pring was affecting him through the remnants of their childhood bond link, feeding in what was happening to Stonn and to her to shorten the time he had, to force Spock to mate with T'Pring. You'd better do some more deep breathing," warned Florence, watching Claudius beginning to react to Sarek.

She waited until the feline fur was smooth again and the purring restarted before she spoke again.

"We didn't know what to do. It was obvious that T'Pring and T'Prilia had entered some joint venture to get Spock back into T'Pring's clutches. Spock most emphatically wanted nothing to do with T'Pring. Then Leonard McCoy had a brilliant idea, real genius level stuff. Spock had survived his first Koon-ut-Kal-if-Fee unmated, despite having entered Plak Tow and fighting Jim Kirk for the privilege of gaining T'Pring. What Leonard said was that all Spock had to do was to remember just what it was that his body had done the last time, to turn off Pon Farr, and then do it again."

Sarek couldn't meet Florence's gaze. "He succeeded?" Sarek's voice wasn't quite under control. "He is controlling

Pon Farr?"

"Seems to have done it. Spock lost control of his telepathic skills and dragged his T'hy'la into the struggle. The three of them ran high fevers well into Christmas Eve morning, then the fever broke and they all woke up starving hungry. I can't say that it was terribly pleasant for them, but Spock's hormone levels went down."

Florence carefully directed her gaze away from Sarek. She knew just what this meant to him, and to every other Vulcan male, and she felt very uncomfortable to see such hope on his normally impassive face. Sarek sat thunderstruck. It was the dream of centuries come true. His son, Spock, was controlling Pon Farr. It was an overwhelming shock, if what Florence said was true. He cautioned himself not to hope too much.

"I was told at The Refuge that Spock had mated with Kirk and McCoy, that Starfleet had issued a dependency posting notice for them."

"That would explain what Jerry Weston - he's the Port Admiral in charge of the Academy here - was so excited about this morning. He wanted Jim in his office, NOW! I suspect that that's more of T'Pring's handiwork. She seems to be one vicious little madam. Mark you, T'Prilia is nearly as bad. Did you know about the conditions she'd set before she agreed to the match?"

A focussed look came back onto Sarek's face, the hint of controlled anger banishing to hope. "She set conditions?"

"She was forcing Spock to leave Starfleet as the main condition for agreeing to marry him. Leave Starfleet, no contact with any of his friends and permanent residence on Vulcan. Nice,

eh?"

Florence noted that the look of wild anger in Sarek's eyes had been replaced by a stronger and far more intense look of rage. Only this, if she was any judge at all, was not directed at his son or his T'hy'la. Quite a few people were going to be in for an interesting time when this ultimate in enraged fathers caught up with them.

"And he agreed? Of course he would. He would have had no choice in the matter. I thank you for informing me of the facts of the situation. The presentation of the information given to me at The Refuge was obscuring the actual events." The words were carefully chosen.

"As long as you're clear in your mind that Spock is the victim here, and not for the first time."

Sarek inclined his head, an acceptance of all the implied criticism that the sentence held. "I will not fail in my duty as his father this time. I allowed myself to be diverted by wider concerns, trusting his future to the attentions of others of the Family who should only have served his best interests. This they failed to do, for the second time. This time I will require an explanation." It was a promise, one which implied the explanation would be followed by retribution.

"I must return to The Refuge. There is to be a Family Council. I must attend." Sarek rose, bowed, handed Florence a disappointed Claudius and went outside.

Florence followed him and arrived in the garden in time to hear a member of the Surak crew explaining to Sarek that Starfleet had requested that they cease unauthorised use of their transporters, and that they could not transbeam him

from his current location to The Refuge. Sarek closed the communicator with a snap.

"Florence, do you have a method of transport that I may borrow?"

"I wish I had, only Spock borrowed it this morning. Ah, timing!"

The comment drew a raised eyebrow, then Sarek noted the trundler that was turning into the grounds of the residence. Florence pinned on a bright smile as she saw the hunted expression hurry onto the face of the single occupant and camp there. Leonard McCoy spotted her companion and felt suddenly very ill.

When the trundler stopped he got out and Florence started speaking before he could explain why he was so late in delivering his promised house call.

"Leonard, just the man we need. Sarek has to get to The Refuge to attend a Family Council, and Spock's gone off in my trundler. Can you give him a ride?"

McCoy found it difficult to speak due to the fact that his throat seemed to be blocked, but he managed to squeak out, "I'm honoured to be of any service, sir."

Sarek nodded once, climbed into the trundler and settled himself. Florence made shooing motions at McCoy and he returned to his seat and got the trundler moving, selecting the destination tab from the rack that Jo, as a consequence of her activities as a local doctor, maintained in her trundler. The computer accepted the instructions and they made good time, McCoy having resisted the urge to declare a medical emergency and get a priority routeing.

Sarek ignored him, staring out of the window with unseeing eyes. McCoy

was quite happy to accept the silence. He didn't know what Sarek thought his marital status was, and he emphatically did not want to discuss the matter whilst trapped in a mobile trundler with what appeared to be a very angry Vulcan.

McCoy considered the thought, then examined Sarek's demeanour again out of the corner of his eye. Sarek was displaying small but definite signs of agitation. The man who was renowned for remaining impassive while an Imperial Klingon raged at him from a range of one metre for over forty minutes was spending the journey pleating and repleating the material of his heavy cloak.

McCoy did an eyes front again and started sweating. The first time he had seen a Vulcan displaying those signs was on the Enterprise, several years before, when Spock had offered to break his neck for him unless he ceased to pry into Spock's private life. And he'd seen the same signs less than thirty-six hours before, only then Spock hadn't wanted to break any neck other than his own. McCoy sweated and prayed and sat very still indeed.

The computer that handled all the road traffic did its normal efficient job and delivered the trundler safely to The Refuge. Sarek unlatched the door and walked away without a word. McCoy slumped in his seat from sheer relief, then scrabbled about dragging his medical tricorder out of its casing. He tumbled out of the other door and walked a few paces, looking about to see if Sarek was still in view. He was, looming like a thundercloud over a diminutive Vulcan child whose voice carried clearly in the still air.

"I give thee greetings, Sarek of Vulcan. I am Starek, child of T'Pring and Stonn. I have been sent to show the way to the Family Council."

"I greet thee, Starek. Proceed."

McCoy aimed the tricorder from the hip, taking a broad scan reading of Sarek, trying not to make the action obvious enough to attract Sarek's attention to what he was doing. McCoy stayed still, waiting for the two Vulcans to move into the body of The Refuge building, then he relaxed and climbed back into the trundler. He dragged out a handkerchief and mopped his face and neck with a hand that shook before turning his attention to the readings stored in the tricorder.

The readings on the scanner showed the results that he had expected, and feared, to see. There was evidence of increased blood pressure, higher than normal body temperature and elevated hormone levels.

"Damn!" he said aloud. "This is turning into an epidemic!" He looked around the parking area, trying to see if Florence Rood's trundler was present. The garish colours that the doctor had insisted on having the vehicle painted (I'm an old woman, I can't see too well any more) were comfortingly absent, which meant that Spock, who had taken Florence's trundler, (according to Florence), hadn't arrived yet. He hoped that the explanation Florence had given him was true. It meant that he had a chance to warn Spock about his father's condition.

He put the medical tricorder down on the seat so that it would be handy when Spock arrived and spent a few minutes wondering just what Florence had told Sarek. The Vulcan hadn't seemed interested in him at all, but McCoy thought if unlikely that Sarek didn't know at least some of the events of the last two days. He fidgeted uncomfortably, his doctor's warning systems triggering the unease. He'd

missed something. He knew that he'd missed something. Something important.

Shaking his head, he picked up the tricorder and rechecked the scan that he'd made. The two sets of readings showed up clearly on the displays, both obviously Vulcan. He smiled to himself as he compared the two; there was no mistaking the differences in mass, temperature and hormone levels. Otherwise the two sets were practically identical, even down to the broad chemical compositions of the tissue types.

He put the tricorder down again, then snatched it up, peering closely at the displays, as if the distance between his eyes and the screens could make a difference to the information. He'd set the tricorder to scan biological and chemical data. He'd scanned Sarek and had got clear readings. While he was scanning Sarek he'd also scanned the child who'd come to greet him, and had got equally clear readings of him. The two sets showed variations in mass, temperature and hormonal activity, otherwise they looked very much the same. The chemistry was the same, the tissue types were the same, the blood type was the same.

McCoy felt the dampness on his forehead and down his spine grow cold. His tricorder wasn't good enough to pick up and identify blood types at the range he'd used it on Sarek, but on the settings that he'd used it could, and did, show that the two being that he'd scanned were of the same biological type, down to the blood type.

Sarek was T-Negative, so was Spock. T-Negative blood was a Family trait, Spock had explained that, which was why there had been no other T-Negative people on Sarek's staff during the events on the journey to Babel when Sarek had needed the massive blood

transfusions during the operation to repair his faulty heart. T-Negative was an inherited trait of the Family, the House of Surak, and one of the reasons that Spock existed at all. The bio-engineering needed to blend Human and Vulcan to create a viable life-form simply did not work with any other blood type. The readings contained in the medical tricorder showed that the child was T-Negative as well.

McCoy ground his teeth in sheer frustration, trying to recall anything that Spock had said about the Family connections with Stonn and T'Pring. Hadn't he mentioned that he'd known Stonn at school, that he'd been one of those children who had teased and tormented the young Spock for having a Human mother? There had been no hint of a closer blood relationship, and he'd said that the marriage with him would have provided an alliance which would have been advantageous to T'Pring's Family.

A movement caught McCoy's eye and a Vulcan came into sight. McCoy aimed the tricorder at him and took a set of readings before the Vulcan went out of range. He compared that set to the two he already had. The chemistry was different. During the next few minutes he managed to get two more readings, one showing the same chemistry as Sarek, the other a third chemistry type.

When the multi-coloured trundler that was Florence's reward for the creation of the computer-controlled Avalon transport system swung into the parking area, McCoy was out of his trundler and running to meet Spock before it stopped.

Spock conveyed amusement at the vision of McCoy running towards him.

"House calls, Doctor?"

"I've always known that making house calls was a mistake." McCoy leaned against the trundler, trying to catch his breath.

"And yet you do not learn from your mistakes."

"I have to talk to you."

"Leonard, I am expected."

"Family Council, yeah I know, let them wait. This is important."

Spock got out of the trundler.

"It's about your father."

Attention caught, Spock asked, "Sarek?"

"Yeah. He's in there. I brought him from Florence's place, but I don't know how much she told him about what's been happening here. At the moment, that's the least of our problems. Look at these readings." McCoy shoved the medical tricorder into Spock's hands. "See that." He tapped the screen to indicate the portion of the information that Spock was to concentrate on.

Spock looked, then swayed, suddenly dizzy. Alarmed and amazed, McCoy steadied him, holding him upright against the trundler until the reaction had passed. "Take deep breaths. I think you should sit down."

"No. I am... recovered. I apologise..."

"Forget it," said McCoy shortly. "I'm sorry that I sprung it on you like that but we haven't got any time to play with. There's something else here. When I scanned Sarek, I also scanned the kid who came out to meet him, to guide him to the Family Council. The readings show the

same tissue and chemistry. Do you agree?"

Spock concentrated on the readings. "Yes. Agreed. Your point, Leonard?"

"Bear with me. I scanned three other people while I was waiting for you, to make sure that the tricorder wasn't malfunctioning. I got one more match for that tissue and chemistry and two other sets of readings. Check them for me?"

Spock looked at McCoy, then bent to the task. "Your evaluation is confirmed. There are three people who are nearly related, from the same Family, and two others from different Families."

"That's how I figured it. I know that the adult male with the hormone problem is Sarek. Spock, the kid said that his name was Starek and that he was the child of T'Pring and Stonn."

Spock's head came up and both eyebrows rose. "That is not possible."

"I'm doing some very illogical guessing here. Are T'Pring and Stonn related in any way to the House of Surak?"

"Not for at least fourteen generations." The answer was prompt.

"Okay. Now you know more about the possibilities of Vulcan genetics than I do. Is there any way that a child of T'Pring and Stonn could have T-Negative blood?"

"None."

"Does she have any other children?"

"No. Did you say the child said his name was Starek?"

"Yes"

"Interesting. It appears to be an insult in at least three languages, and it is not a name that is common."

McCoy looked up at the clouds, clenched his fists and growled. Here he was telling Spock important news and the irritating man was more interested in names!

"I think that can wait. Let's concentrate on the kid's parentage. If T'Pring and Stonn can't be his parents, then who is?"

Spock shook his head and handed the tricorder back to McCoy. "I do not know. If he is indeed T-Negative, as these readings show, then he must be of the House of Surak. One of my Family. It may go a long way to explain why T'Pring is so confident of success."

"Success? Spock!" McCoy reached out and shook Spock's shoulder, rousing him from the dazed state that he seemed to have fallen into. "What do you mean, success?"

Spock looked blankly at him. "I do not remember clearly. I seem to recall a conversation." Spock lifted a hand to his head. "Why did I say that?"

McCoy almost dropped the tricorder in his haste to turn the machine on Spock. "Oh no! I don't believe it. Spock, your hormone levels are rising again!"

The urgency of McCoy's words snapped Spock back into focus and he straightened up, directing his attention to his own condition. "I fear that you are correct. It seems that I was less than successful in my attempts to obviate Pon Farr."

"Well the good news is that you're not about to go amok immediately; I

reckon you've got at least two weeks, unless it accelerates again. Spock, is T'Pring doing this?"

Spock looked stunned at the suggestion. "She would not, it is against all..." His voice died away, then he said, in a far different tone, "Of course she would. She has already done so, hasn't she? She has so much to lose now, that one more infringement of Tradition would be without meaning to her." His voice trailed away again as ideas that were clearly unpalatable occurred to him. "I wonder just what else has she done?"

"Meaning?" asked McCoy.

"The child Starek. Clearly Stonn is not the father, although I believe that he thinks that he is. I must go into the Council now. Your aid, this information, is of immeasurable value." The words tumbled out in a fashion totally at odds with Spock's normal diction.

"Spock, are you all right? Do you want me to come in with you?"

"I think that the answer is no to both questions. Can you work out a gene map from the information you have here?" Spock indicated the tricorder.

"Hell, I may be good but I can't work miracles. I'd need blood or tissue samples do that sort of work."

"Noted." Spock began to walk towards The Refuge. "Find Amanda," he ordered. "Take her to Florence's house. I will bring Sarek there."

Muttering, "Not an epidemic, it's a plague, one called T'Pring," McCoy ran back to his trundler and scrambled inside. After a short debate with himself he decided that it would be easier to track down Amanda by using the Comms. equipment at Florence's house, and while

he was doing that Florence could fill him in on exactly what she'd told Sarek.

Spock strode into The Refuge and looked about him. The entrance hall was deserted, suspiciously so to his suddenly more aware senses. He looked about, then decided to try the area of the building usually set up as a sand garden. The garden was an attachment to the main building and, on Vulcan, would be outdoors. On planets other than Vulcan, where Family houses were established, the normal layout was preserved and the sand garden enclosed, usually in what Humans described as a glass house. It was a large area, and Spock deduced that there would be more than just his immediate Family involved in the Council.

As he entered the sand garden he realised that his assumptions had been spectacularly accurate. He paused, blinking as the heat of the room washed over him, into him. He fought against the dizziness the sudden change of temperature caused. T'Pau regarded him from her seat, and the thought occurred to him that he had never seen her standing or walking in any Council meeting. She always contrived to arrive first and so gained the illusion of control of the proceedings by forcing everyone else to take their places as she watched them.

Seated next to T'Pau, looking ill at ease, was Solen, T'Pring's father, the colour of his Family's robes clashing with both the colour of T'Pau's robes and the pallor of his face. T'Pring sat a little way from her, with a child who Spock assumed was Starek standing beside her. With a flicker of indignation Spock realised that T'Pring had arrayed herself in a robe that proclaimed that she was a member of the House of Surak, although

the child was wearing a robe which was completely neutral.

Stonn and T'Prilia sat on the other side of T'Pau, about as far away from T'Pring as the layout of the room would allow. They had chosen to wear the same colour robes as Solen, and Spock remembered that Stonn and Solen were related by blood, as well as by the supposed marriage between Stonn and T'Pring. The first Challenge had robbed that Family of the benefit of a notable alliance with the House of Surak and Spock realised that T'Pring must have had other reasons than simply wishing to keep Stonn as her lover. To do that all she would have had to do was go through with the marriage to him and then resume the relationship with Stonn once he had returned to the Enterprise. There must have been a reason for not wishing to take the most logical route to her goal. To risk issuing a Challenge. To have Stonn agree to fight for her, and risk death in order to accomplish what could have been his so much more simply. Their actions were just not logical.

Spock looked around for his father. Isolated from them all, doubtless by design, sat Sarek. He was wearing his normal set of long Ambassadorial robes which, by ancient design, were of a House that had perished trying to spread the word of Surak. Ambassadors between Families had taken to wearing the design in honour of those who had died to ensure that future generations had the opportunity to continue the task of spreading peace. Ambassadors to other peoples had continued to honour the long-dead envoys. The heavy jewelled neckpiece was pure Family, proclaiming in precious metals and stones both Sarek's lineage and his rank. Sarek was glowering at T'Pring from under lowered brows.

"Thee are late," announced T'Pau,

not looking at him as he closed the door behind him, sealing the room and stopping the flow of cold air which had entered when he had.

Spock found that he was no longer intimidated by the woman he had held in such awe for so long. In fact, he found that he was bitterly disappointed at her abnegation of the Traditions that she had always expounded. He paused, looked at her, then gathered up the robe that he had spent most of the morning acquiring in preparation for this meeting, then rethought his behaviour. Walking across the soft sand of the garden, allowing the material to trail in the sand and erase his footprints seemed to him a very symbolic gesture of defiance.

"As the courtesy of a guide was not extended to me, you should not have expected otherwise." Spock took up a position standing next to Sarek. No chair had been provided for him, but that didn't matter. Spock did not intend to tarry.

T'Pau asked coldly, "Has thee spent so long from Vulcan that thee has forgotten the correct way to behave?"

Spock looked at each of the people present in turn before responding. "I have forgotten nothing."

Silence descended and Spock took the opportunity to study Starek. The child's hair was wavy, despite ruthless attempts to make it lie flat in the formal style. A glance down at Sarek gave evidence of a similar efforts. Both were dressed in the formal robes, head bowed, hands tucked out of sight. With the skill born of the long practice of such control Spock easily recognised the signs of the desperate struggle each was undergoing to achieve the outward semblance of calm. Spock found another cause to add to the leaping flames of his resolve. The child was innocent of all wrong doing.

He had no part in the machinations of his supposed parents and so should rightly be considered as much a victim as himself.

Waiting with infinite patience for the next stage in the manoeuvring, Spock created, examined and discarded theories and plans of action. He decided on a preferred outcome, the removal of Starek, Sarek and himself from The Refuge with as much alacrity as was possible, and bent his will and concentration to ensuring that it came to pass. Much would depend on Sarek's condition and his attitude to the purported marriage of his son to two Human males, and to whatever information Florence had given him. It occurred to him that there was a way to determine whether McCoy's deductions about Starek were accurate.

Spock looked inside himself and lightly accessed the long disused Family link. Cut off by eighteen years of silent disapproval, then several years of distant travel, followed by the rigorous denials during the rites at Gol, Spock had had no cause to access the Familial Link which bound all members of his Family together. He was mildly astonished at the ease with which he found his way past the carefully barriered mental doors and into the mental maze which was the Link of the House of Surak.

Sarek's mental signature was as unmistakable as it always had been, and it now flared unevenly, a certain sign that his father was suffering from the advancing effects of Pon Farr. Endeavouring to shield himself from notice Spock essayed his surroundings, probing for any other close blood relatives. He found the identities of several cousins, an aunt and an uncle, all obviously nearby, probably in The Refuge, then he caught the misty but clear signature of T'Pau, who was not a close blood relative but was undoubtedly

more visible here where there were so few of the Family present. That seemed to be all the Family on Avalon, but he stayed, stubbornly continuing the search until he found the presence that he had decided to search for. It was a frantically, tightly shielded presence whose existence could only be determined because of the very effort being put into trying to avoid detection.

Spock considered making contact with the child there and then, to reassure him, but decided against it. Starek would have had little opportunity to learn how to control mental communication across the Familial Link. There were no members of the House of Surak posted to the Avalon Academy, and few would have journeyed here. The chances were extremely high that Starek had never encountered anyone at Familial Link level before, other than T'Pring, Stonn and Solen, who would not have been visible to Starek in this aspect of the Link which was attainable only to those of Surak's House. The Family to which T'Pring, Solen and Stonn belonged would have a different mental maze to work in, so there was little wonder that Starek was trying to ensure that he was unnoticed; there had never been anyone in this aspect of the Link before. It was another injury that he would have to avenge.

The mental presence was all the proof that Spock needed. The gene map could wait. Starek was of the House of Surak and no child of Stonn's. It seemed that T'Pring was playing a very complicated game indeed. He withdrew from the Familial Link to find that silence still prevailed in the room. He continued to wait and felt, rather than saw, Sarek stir. Spock dropped his hand onto Sarek's shoulder and gripped tightly. Sarek looked up, his eyes narrowing, and rage clearly visible. Spock returned look for look with apparently unruffled calm and shook his head slightly. Sarek

maintained his glare, and Spock the pressure of his grip, for 14.3 seconds, then Sarek relaxed back into the chair. Spock maintained his hand on Sarek's shoulder although he didn't keep up the pressure. He made a mental note to apologise to Sarek for the bruises he had inflicted.

T'Pau watched the exchange with interest; it was the opportunity that she had been waiting for. "Thee were going to speak, Sarek?"

"My Father was going to enquire when this Council was to commence. We have other concerns which we have interrupted to attend here, and we wish to return to them."

"Your bondmates?" suggested Stonn unwisely.

"Is it not the purpose of this Council to discuss my marital intentions?" asked Spock sweetly.

"You have already married," retorted Stonn.

"By no means. This is to be my wedding day. I am to marry the Lady T'Prilia. This Council has interrupted my preparations for the ceremony."

Spock increased his grip on Sarek's shoulder as his father stirred again, and so inflicted another crop of bruises. Sarek stilled.

The silence became deep and profound. It was the kind of silence that lumps could be dug out of with a spoon, and on the other side of the silence Vulcan brains were busy at work, attempting to analyse Spock's strategy. Spock calculated that there was only a 3.9% chance of anyone present determining his objectives.

Spock addressed T'Prilia. "At what time should I expect the ceremony to begin?"

T'Prilia glared back at him. "Thee knows that I have married Stonn."

"Information of this nature has reached me, but I regard the source to be... unreliable. If this is indeed true, Stonn, I find your flagrant disregard for Tradition to be most unsatisfactory. This is the second time that you have claimed a prior right to my affianced bride. Were you unaware that Tradition demands that you should inform me of these predatory intentions, so that I could attempt to find a suitable replacement?"

The sarcasm was plain and the question was unanswerable, and Spock felt a ripple of appreciation from Sarek.

T'Prilia tried her best. "Stonn is aware of Tradition, as I am."

"Then you intend to fulfil your part of the agreement and marry me?"

"I agreed to marry you when I thought that there were no alternatives open to me. Stonn proposed an alternative, and I agreed. There is also an alternative for you. T'Pring."

Spock looked at T'Pring, who was ignoring him.

"Surely a husband was arranged for her?"

"She offered to wait, for you. I resign all the rights which you granted to me. I return her to you." Stonn spoke the words hurriedly and drew back as T'Pring turned to glare at him.

Spock slowly lifted an eyebrow. It seemed that there were other goals to be achieved, and that he had underestimated

Stonn, or perhaps, to be more accurate, T'Prilia.

"Absolutely?" queried Spock.

"Absolutely and for all of time," confirmed Stonn as T'Pring's glared intensified.

"I accept."

"The wedding will begin in three planetary hours," announced T'Pau, her first contribution to the dialogue.

It gave Spock a very deep delight to contradict her. "It will not."

T'Pau managed to imply that Spock, his condition uncertain, had to be humoured. "At which time does thee prefer?"

"There will be no wedding ceremony," stated Spock flatly.

T'Pring switched her glare from Stonn to him, and Spock noticed that Starek was hard put not to shrink away from her.

"What does thee mean? No wedding ceremony? I will not come to thy aid in your Time otherwise."

"You will do as you are bidden, chattel. Stonn has resigned all rights to you and has returned you to my keeping, and if I wish it you will serve me. I do not intend to make the mistake of thinking that any vows of loyalty or fealty will bind you. T'Pau, I leave this chattel in thy keeping, that thee may instruct her in the proper behaviour expected for one of her status. I require thee to have more success in this than did her previous instructors."

Sarek permitted himself a feeling of intense pride at the behaviour of his son,

then, seeing T'Pring gather herself, brushed Spock's hand aside and rose to his feet.

"Is there any other business that thee wishes to deal with this day, my son?"

"Yes, two items. Solen, I require thee to return to me the bride price which I paid to thee."

"Thee has no right to that money. It is mine!" T'Pring's hands clenched on the ornately carved arms of her chair.

Spock looked at T'Pau. "Thee neglects thy duties. Remind the chattel that she is property and so owns nothing. Solen, thee failed to teach thy daughter to follow the Traditions and so fulfil the obligations which thee had agreed that she should. She Challenged and so broke the bargain made between our Houses. Thee should have returned the bride price to my household when this become known to thee. Thee failed to do this and I now require that it is done. I will not accept haggling or bargaining."

"The money was used to purchase property, an estate held in T'Pring's name. Will thee accept the title of the property as recompense?" Solen stared at a point far away, ignoring his daughter who was looking at him as if she had never seen him before.

Truly, Spock thought, there are many plans being followed here today. First Stonn, and now Solen have abandoned her.

"I forbid it. The estate is mine, and my son's." T'Pring was on her feet.

Spock looked at T'Pau, raised an eyebrow in mocking reminder and said, "Send me details of the estate and I will consider thy proposal. There is the other item." Spock allowed a command tone to

slip into his voice. "Child, attend me."

"No!"

"Be silent, chattel. Starek!"

The child slid away from T'Pring's almost frantic grab and halted in front of Spock, head carefully bowed in submission. Spock decided that his guess was most probably accurate, the hair was decidedly curly.

"No." Stonn rose to his feet, and took a step towards Spock. "The child is mine. I will be responsible for his upbringing."

Sarek found that he had to look away from the open plea on Stonn's face, but Spock returned look for look with something like pity. He switched from honorific and impersonal modes to personal speech, addressing Stonn directly.

"Why do you claim him?"

"Because he is my child."

"Did T'Pring tell you this? That she was to bear your child? Was that why you agreed to support her? Was that what you were trying to tell me after she Challenged and chose my Captain as her Champion?"

Solen interrupted. "She chose an outworlder? I was not aware of this. I thought that she had chosen Stonn and that he had defeated you." Solen looked worse than he had when Spock had first arrived; clearly he had not been aware of this piece of perfidy.

Spock realised that he would have to explain. "She chose my Captain. I fought him. And I killed him. The fact that he is alive is due only to the intervention of my other T'hy'la. T'Pring

made a logical choice, as she explained. If Captain Kirk had won, he would not want her and she would have Stonn. If I won and chose to keep her I would still have had to answer to charges of murder and so she would have Stonn, or I could reject her, which I did, and she would have Stonn. Yes, she most certainly had you, Stonn, but I doubt if you ever truly had her."

Spock looked at T'Pau. "Thy interruption on that day was most timely. It prevented one scandal and allowed another which thee thought that thee could contain. I wonder why thee permitted it?" Spock held up a hand, palm towards T'Pau. "Do not bother to answer. I doubt that I could believe any answer that thee give me."

"I find thy words insulting." T'Pau hissed out the sentence.

"If thee finds the truth insulting, so be it. Stonn, like myself you are a victim of T'Pring's lies." Steeling himself Spock delivered the information that would negate the reason that Stonn had had for supporting the Challenge, and for his subsequent support of T'Pring, and for the years of exile. "She has lied to you. Stonn. Starek is not your child. He cannot be your son. His blood type is T-Negative."

Stonn peered at him in bewilderment, shaking his head, then stumbled backwards and sat down hard. "I ask forgiveness, I show emotion."

"The cause is more than sufficient. I had wanted to inform you of this matter in a different manner. I regret that I could not do so."

T'Prilia reached out and clasped Stonn's hand. "Are thee sure of this, Spock?"

"Yes. The child Starek has the blood group T-Negative and so cannot be a child of Stonn. Precisely who the father is is something that I will have to determine."

"Until thee does I will take charge of the child."

T'Pau's offer crackled into the room and Spock was aware of surprise issuing from most of the audience. It was an unusual offer, given T'Pau's reputation. There was a curious quality of eagerness in T'Pau's voice, and T'Pring had been made notably angry by it, even more intensely than when Spock had informed Stonn of her deceit. The most interesting reaction was from Starek. The offer brought a spurt of pure terror from him and he lifted his head to stare with pleading eyes at the man who had shattered the framework of his family life.

"Thy offer is appreciated, but unnecessary. Come, Starek. Father?"

"You accept that child?" Sarek too used the personal mode.

"My reasons are my own, but I will explain them fully, to you." Spock allowed himself a look around the room. "And only to you. Come!"

Spock left, affecting an unhurried gait and paced by Sarek. Starek hesitated, abandoned, then darted after them out of the heat of the room and into the bleak coldness of a winters day. Shivering in reaction, both emotional and physical, he halted the traditional distance away from Sarek and Spock once the trundler had been reached, his hands folded and tucked out of sight in the long sleeves of his robe, his head meekly bowed, affording Spock another excellent view of hair that settled into waves no matter how rigorously the curls had been straightened.

"What now, my son?" Sarek asked.

Spock decided to take him literally. "Now? We get into the trundler."

Sarek's brow creased and his voice deepened. "An explanation is in order." The thunder in the tone shook Starek, who looked up, eyes wide with apprehension.

Spock moved, placing his body between Starek and his father.

"Not here," he countered, and locked gazes again.

There was a long pause then Sarek looked away, turned to the trundler and climbed inside, sitting stiffly, looking into the distance at nothing, ignoring the greys of the winter landscape and the threatening clouds overhead.

Spock relaxed fractionally, took a deep breath and climbed in beside him. Starek stood undecided, and to Spock's eyes, forlorn. "Come, Starek." He gestured to the child to get into the trundler.

Starek dithered. More than anything he wished to leave The Refuge and the people in it but he didn't know how this being, of whom he had heard so many tales, would react.

"Starek, I do understand your apprehension, and some of the reasons which make the acceptance of this offer difficult for you. This is my pledge to you. My offer is not conditional. No matter who your parents prove to be I will continue to sponsor you to the limits of possibility, and probably beyond."

The child stood motionless and Spock delicately reached out to touch the portion of the Family Link which he judged would give him access to Starek.

The resonance was clear, sounding and reverberating. Spock obtained one glimpse of an aching void and involuntarily reached out to assuage it, knowing the loneliness and apartness all too well. Starek wailed once and threw himself into Spock's arms, scrambling up onto his lap, locking small arms tightly round Spock's neck and burying his face into the wonderfully comfortable angle of neck and shoulder. Spock wrapped as much of the child as possible into his arms, freely giving the contact and comfort that had always been denied to him.

Sarek started, the volatile blast of emotion drawing him from his abstraction. The Family Link echoed and re-echoed with the intensity of Aloneness/Apartness/Uniqueness from the two sources. He reached out a tentative hand, laid it carefully on Spock's shoulder.

"I think that there is something here that we should discuss," he said softly.

Spock managed to get his voice under enough control to force out, "Not here, please, Father. We have company."

This sent Sarek's hands dancing over the control panel. As The Refuge disappeared into the distance Sarek caught a glimpse of several figures which had been closing on them. The implications of that action were interesting.

"I must ask this question at least, Spock. I felt you communicate with the child through the Family Link. Is he your son?"

Spock raised his head and looked, unguarded, at his father; his expression hung somewhere in the tangle between laughter, anger and sorrow.

"No, Father. I regret that I do not believe Starek to be my son. However, I believe that there is an excellent possibility that he will prove to be yours!"

Sarek seemed to expand in size. "You accuse me?"

"Kroykah! Did I accuse you of anything? I said that I think that you will prove to be the father of Starek. I remind you of the propensities of his mother, who is noted for scheming, lying and ignoring Tradition. I could not mate with such a one, and I cannot believe that you could."

"Then how?"

Spock rubbed his cheek against the top of Starek's head. "Haven't you heard, Father - there are always possibilities!"

Outraged silence followed as Spock had hoped it would, and it lasted until Florence's house was reached. Their arrival was greeted by an outflowing of Humans, with Amanda leading the way. She went to Sarek, and the other Humans, showing a delicacy of feeling as well as a strong instinct for self preservation, ignored them and concentrated on Spock. Leonard made it to him first and waved a tricorder over him.

"Your hormone levels are still up, Spock!" he stated loudly.

"I have not yet been able to concentrate on the problem, Leonard. Doubtless when I can I will be able to deal with the difficulty."

Sarek, hands entwined in Amanda's and drawing comfort from her presence, interrupted. "You are still...? Why did you not say?"

"At The Refuge? T'Pring would have been most pleased to hear such a

confirmation of my condition."

"He's got a little time to spare now," said McCoy. "How are you doing?"

Sarek looked flustered at being on the receiving end of such direct questioning about such a delicate subject, but Amanda simply laughed. "We are doing okay. Spock, I would like to hear what happened at The Refuge, and why you are accompanied by a child?"

"Let's go inside, shall we?" suggested Jim Kirk. "If we discuss this out here the Fleet Security Team that looks after Florence will also hear all about it too. They aren't allowed to eavesdrop on conversations that take place inside, and besides it's cold out here and it's going to start raining."

Everyone trooped inside, Spock carrying Sarek who maintained his tight grip about his neck, as if it were the only solid thing in a world gone suddenly mad, and this too would disappear if he relaxed his hold for an instant.

Spock sat down in one of the vast armchairs with Sarek curled up on his lap. Sarek and Amanda arranged themselves closely together on the sofa. Florence bagged another armchair and Kirk waved McCoy to take the third, walking over to stand by the window.

"Okay," said Florence, "where do we begin?"

"I'll start," announced Amanda. "Jim and I met up at Captain Weston's office. We've sorted out Starfleet. Basically we've told them that the messages about Spock's resignation and the announcement of marriage between Spock, Jim and Leonard were sent by a Vulcan woman who was not rational. I think it likely that this will be confirmed."

Spock looked at Jim, then at Leonard, who said, "Dolores is looking for you. She got posted to the Enterprise as your replacement. Of course that was rescinded when the dependency posting was sent through."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "T'Pring is becoming more ungarded in her activities, and is beginning to reveal the breadth of her schemes. At times she appears almost unbalanced in her efforts to attain her goals."

"She always was, wasn't she?" asked Amanda.

Spock shrugged. "At the time I had nothing against which I could measure her behaviour."

"Well we all do now," said Jim. "I take it that Stonn and T'Prilia have married, and that it's legal?"

Sarek drew a deep breath. "The legality of their wedding is something which could be challenged, if you wish it to be, Spock?"

"No. I do not wish to marry with T'Prilia. Stonn is as much a victim as we are, and he has earned his freedom."

"Victim?" asked Florence. "I thought he'd stolen T'Pring from you?"

Spock's lips twitched. "It is becoming a matter of some conjecture as to whether he 'stole' T'Pring or she 'stole' him. They had been lovers for some years; I knew of this." Spock addressed Sarek directly. "I saw no reason to object. I believed that I would never become adult and did not wish to deny to T'Pring the companionship that I could not provide. I underestimated the skill of the Vulcan physicians who engineered me."

Amanda leaned a little closer to

Sarek, a mute reassurance that his chosen companion was right there for him. "Will you mate with T'Pring, or do you wish us to find another more suitable mate for you? There were a number of... suitable women who have sufficient scientific qualifications, and who have indicated a willingness to join Starfleet and be posted to the Enterprise," she said.

Spock looked a little startled, so Amanda continued, "You did know this, didn't you?"

"No, I did not. The messages from T'Pau indicated that there were few women willing to be my mate, and that of those T'Prilia was the most suitable."

Amanda's eyes narrowed. "In future I am going to handle these arrangements for my son." She glared at Sarek. "I trust that you do not object?"

Sarek shook his head, then McCoy reminded them all of the other alternative. "If he can get this memory thing under control he's not going to need any arrangement made for him!"

"As I am now aware of the nature of the problem I believe that I will be able to get 'this memory thing' under control," stated Spock.

"I'll line up two or three just in case," Amanda declared firmly, and Spock wisely chose not to argue.

"So where did the kid come from?" asked Jim, who had been watching the pair with more than mild interest from his position by the window.

"He is the child that T'Pring told Stonn that she was expecting in order to gain his cooperation when she Challenged."

"You mean she was already

pregnant?" Jim's and Amanda's questions overlapped.

"Stonn said 'The woman is...' and then T'Pau interrupted," said Leonard. "Was that what he was going to say? That she was pregnant?"

"Yes. T'Pring told him that the child was his. But as you discovered, the child is not!"

Amanda looked at Sarek for confirmation of this second item of stunning news and he nodded. Jim mouthed a startled oath and Florence was beyond comment.

McCoy started to explain. "I scanned you at The Refuge, Sarek, and got him too, by mistake. Your bio scans are identical, when allowances for age are taken into account. His blood group is T-Negative."

"She was having an affair with someone else? Besides this Stonn character?" Florence asked.

"Not necessarily," stated Spock. "I ask you to consider her profession."

Three of the four Humans in the room looked blankly at each other. Amanda said, "She works at the Vulcan Academy of Science."

"As a researcher in veterinary techniques, the treatment of diseases and injuries to indigenous Vulcan species," added Sarek.

"Why is this important?" asked Leonard.

"Due to climatic and ecological changes brought about by the use of some technologies, there are some species on Vulcan which are in danger of becoming extinct. This was recognised

many centuries ago and steps were taken to preserve these creatures so that they could be re-introduced once the ecological damage had been reversed."

"She's a zoo keeper?" asked Jim.

"Of a particular type of zoo. Part of her work would have been to increase the gene pool range of the existing specimens of those species which are endangered."

"A gene bank?" asked Leonard.

"Yes."

Sarek was sitting upright, his eyebrows almost at vertical. "You dare to suggest that she tampered with the Vaults of Tomorrow?"

"Given her talent for ignoring Tradition, I would say that it is at least a strong possibility, far more likely than one of our Family deciding to mate with my affianced bride."

"What are the 'Vaults of Tomorrow?'" asked Florence. "I've never heard of them."

Amanda looked at her friend, glee spilling onto her face as she realised that some secrets on Vulcan had defeated her determined efforts to uncover them. Spock watched Sarek, waiting for him to either demand his silence or to explain the name. When he did neither Spock spoke up.

"The Vaults of Tomorrow are a gene bank. They hold genetic material in storage for endangered species. They also hold Vulcan genetic material. Any adult Vulcan who leaves the planet has the right to store material there, in case radiation causes damage which could harm future generations."

"And also to prevent Families from

becoming endangered species," Sarek added, his voice deepened way into the bass register. A hint of green showed on his cheek bones. Despite long exposure to the Terran proclivity for discussing the most private subjects in a casual manner he found that this particular subject was one that he could wish was not talked of so freely.

There was an embarrassed silence, then Jim decided to jump in with both feet. "I assume that you had material stored there, Sarek?"

The green deepened. "I first travelled from Vulcan over sixty years ago. I had no children at that time."

"Vulcan could not permit the direct line of the House of Surak to become extinct," added Amanda. "I approve of that decision."

Leonard leaned forward. "You think that T'Pring took some of the material from the Vaults and inseminated herself?"

Spock nodded, his expression grim with the determination of one who, having started something, will see the sequence out to the bitter end, no matter what. "I am assuming that T'Pring thought me unaware of her relationship with Stonn. Providing a child who was obviously of the House would have secured her role as my wife if I had chosen to keep her after the Challenge. It would have been a logical step to take, to ensure my compliance with her activities once I discovered that she was not a suitable mate, and she would not have wished to remain as a chattel. As the mother of a child of the House of Surak she would have been secure whether I stayed on Vulcan or left to return to my duties on the Enterprise. In the event of my rejecting her she had first prepared her control over Stonn by telling him of

the child's existence."

"But why?" asked Florence, appalled at the callousness of the scheme that Spock was outlining.

"Starfleet is not the safest career, and I am Sarek's heir. If I had been killed before I had a child then the way would have become open for T'Pring to claim the position for her child, particularly if the father of her child is Sarek."

"That is assuming that all this supposition is born out by the facts. I take it that you want me to build a gene map of the kid and find out who Daddy really is?"

"I will have nothing to do with this child." The words rumbled out of Sarek. "Come, my wife."

Sarek stalked out of the room without a backward glance, and Amanda, with a quick, "I'll talk to him, once he's calmed down," hurried after him.

Jim leaned against the window, trying to catch sight of the pair. As the first of the threatened rain thudded against the transparency he announced, "They've beamed up. Where do you think they'll go?"

"Undoubtedly to the Surak. Sarek would not go to The Refuge, not with T'Pring and T'Pau there," said Spock. "I still require the gene map, Leonard. If Sarek does prove to be Starek's father then we will have the proof that is needed of tampering with the Vaults of Tomorrow, which is a far more serious crime than any which has been committed against me."

"If I can have a blood sample from him I can start now. A straight comparison will take about fourteen hours to run."

"What are you going to compare it with? I can't see Sarek standing still while you take a sample from him. Not while he's that ticked!" Florence jerked a thumb at the now empty garden.

Leonard McCoy grinned. "I've still got the records from when he was aboard and I had to operate on him. Tissue samples, the lot. I made sure that I had all the records from the first mission returned to me. They've been arriving in dribs and drabs for the last six months."

"I wondered what all those deliveries for the Medical Department were for," said Jim, finally abandoning the window in favour of the now vacated sofa.

"They were for me, to stop me getting bored. You know what happens when I get bored!" McCoy's voice lowered and he narrowed his eyes as he peered at Kirk.

"What?" asked Florence. "What? What?"

Chortling evilly Leonard smiled at her. "I run medicals, and put certain people who are overweight on diets! You think that you can uncurl a hand from round your neck long enough to get me a few CC's, Spock?"

Spock murmured in Vulcan for a few moments then Starek released his grip and sat up, offering McCoy his hand. Spock's arms remained looped around him.

"Tell him it won't hurt?" suggested the doctor.

"I have explained to him that you are a physician and that you require a blood sample. He has never had a blood sample taken before, and I am not going to lie to him. I told him that it would

hurt, but not very much."

Jim giggled and Florence chuckled at the outrage on McCoy's face. "Well thank you very much."

"You're welcome. Is that the correct response?"

McCoy gently took Starek's hand and withdrew the blood sample. Starek didn't flinch, but then McCoy hadn't expected him to; the kid was a Vulcan and the training started early.

"Can I ask? Just what are you going to do with him?"

Spock looked at the child still sitting on his lap. "I think that the first thing I should do is attempt to explain this situation to him."

"You can't do that. He's far too young to understand." protested McCoy.

"He is aware of the Challenge, and Stonn's remarriage, and the fact that Stonn can not be his father. He heard all this at The Refuge. I will not lie to him," repeated Spock. "Certainly not about matters which concern him so closely. Of all the people involved he is the most blameless, and it is my duty to ensure that he is not damaged by any of the events that he is in no way responsible for. Knowledge will be far less harmful than uncertainty."

"What uncertainty?" asked Florence.

"I do not understand?"

"He does. I've been watching him. He's been listening and understanding every word so far, haven't you, Starek?" Florence addressed the child, who lifted eyes suddenly filled with hints of terror to meet her gaze. Starek leaned back against

Spock's chest, and Spock felt the shiver run through the thin frame.

"Can you understand English Standard, Starek?" asked Spock gently.

Starek swallowed hard, then whispered, "Yes, Honoured Sir. But I do not understand every word as the Honoured Lady has said."

"I wish to know how you have come by this knowledge. I do not think that it is something that T'Pring and Stonn included in your education. They do not approve of outworlders."

"It is not included, Honoured Sir."

Spock raised an eyebrow, and the Humans held their breath until.

"I asked the computer to instruct me."

An explosive snort ripped through the air and Starek's eyes swivelled towards the source, Jim Kirk, and then back to his tightly clenched hands.

Spock asked, "Did you neglect your lessons?"

"No, Honoured Sir. My lessons were always completed on time."

"And accurately?" prompted Spock.

"Yes, Honoured Sir."

"You did not have permission to use the computer to tutor you in English Standard?"

"No, Honoured Sir, but I was not told not to." Starek's voice died away and his face lost colour.

Spock debated with himself, recalling to mind certain incidents from

his own childhood and the way he'd wished Sarek had reacted to them. "Were you not instructed to learn?" he asked calmly.

Starek looked puzzled. "Yes?"

"Then you were merely obeying an instruction. If there were types of instruction that were thought to be unsuitable in the Teaching Computer then these should have been barred to you. Clearly English Standard was not barred, and was therefore deemed to be suitable."

"I regret that I can not agree." Starek's face grew paler still. "I knew that learning English was against the wishes of T'Pring and Stonn. I knew that I was disobeying them." The admission was clearly one that he wished he didn't have to make.

Spock looked up at his T'hy'la, who grinned back at him, implying that he was on his own.

"Can you explain why you disobeyed them?"

"It was because I could not understand their attitude towards Terran Humans, Honoured Sir. T'Pring and Stonn stated repeatedly that Terrans were illogical, unreasonable, and without honour, that they were... untrustworthy?" Starek pronounced the word slowly and when Spock nodded continued. "I was fully aware of their opinions. It was... your pardon, Honoured Sir, I do not know the word in English." He uttered several phrases in Vulcan and then Spock said,

"Conflict."

"Conflict," repeated Starek. "What I saw on the broadcasts and read in my lessons conflicted with the opinions

stated by T'Pring and Stonn. I was curious."

More snorts sounded about the room, and Starek's eyes swivelled about, taking in the unabashed display of emotion.

"Was the usage incorrect?"

"The usage was accurate. Please continue."

"I did not understand why the opinions of T'Pring and Stonn conflicted with the evidence of the broadcasts and the histories, so I reasoned that if I learned more about Terrans then I might be able to understand why."

"Have you reached any conclusions yet?"

"Some, Honoured Sir. I think that T'Pring and Stonn were inaccurate in all save one aspect of their assessment of Terran behaviour. They are illogical."

This proved to be too much for Human control and the three roared with laughter. Starek openly stared at them.

"Is that laughter?"

"Yes, Starek, that is laughter."

"Why do Terrans laugh?"

"Because they are illogical."

McCoy wiped his eyes. "You sure he's only 'bout six?"

"Quite sure. Starek has been deprived of many opportunities but has clearly profited from all those granted to him."

"Or those he's taken," said Florence. "How about introducing us?"

"My apologies. Starek, I present Doctor Florence Rood. This is her house and we are her guests." Spock looked enquiringly at Florence and she grinned back.

"You are most welcome, Starek. You may address me as Florence." She made the spread finger salute to him and he returned it.

"This is Doctor Leonard McCoy. He is my T'hy'la. And this is Captain James Kirk. He too is my T'hy'la."

From the wide-eyed stare both men made the same guess. "Have you heard about us, Starek?" asked McCoy.

"Yes, Honoured Sir."

"No need for 'Honoured Sir'. My name is Leonard."

"And mine is Jim. May I suggest that some of what you may have heard about us... conflicts with what actually happened."

Starek looked from one man to the other then said, "I think it highly probable."

"Now that we're all introduced," said Florence, "we'll take over the baby sitting and you can take yourself off to bed, Spock."

"Florence..." began Spock.

"Damn good idea. You have some... business to take care of?" said McCoy, waving the tricorder over Spock as Starek slipped off his lap and out of range of the instrument. "The sooner you get that... business sorted out the sooner we can start enjoying this shore leave."

Spock looked at Jim for support but he only waved his hand, brushing Spock

towards the stairs.

Florence pointed a finger. "Get!" she said.

Spock acquiesced and got. They watched him descend towards the guest rooms in silence, then McCoy rose.

"I'll go and start work on these gene maps. Do you understand what gene maps are, Starek?"

"No."

"Hmm. They're a way of looking at people so that we can tell who their parents are. Do you understand that we think that Stonn isn't your father?"

"Yes. Spock thinks that Ambassador Sarek is my father."

"Spock is a good guesser, and I'll be able to confirm it, or say no and provide a map so that we can match it against other people until we can find the right man."

Nodding to Florence he said to Kirk, "I'll have to get aboard the Enterprise. Shouldn't have too much trouble, it's not as if I'm an Engineer. I should have results by tomorrow morning. I'll send the trundler back to Jo's place after I get to the Transporter Station. Bye!"

Starek looked at the two Humans and fought down a wave of panic. One was the T'hy'la of the man who had pledged his support to him and so would be bound by the same pledge. Only this person was Terran, and everything that he had heard from T'Pring and Stonn indicated that Terrans were barbarians. But T'Pring and Stonn were oath breakers and their word was suspect. He felt very small and very alone.

Jim looked at Florence for help; small children, of any race, were outside

his experience.

Florence winked. "Starek, there is another member of the household to whom you should be introduced."

Starek looked up obediently, then looked in the direction Florence indicated. He jerked in surprise and stared.

"Starek, this is Claudius. Claudius, this is Starek, he's another guest here."

Claudius gazed unblinkingly at Starek, who seemed mesmerised by the blue and green eyes.

"May I suggest that you sit down, Starek," said Florence.

Starek occupied the seat that he'd shared with Spock, never once looking away from the cat. Claudius waited until he was seated then got up, walked along the sofa and leapt lightly onto the arm of the chair.

"Mrmrmr?"

"What should I do?" asked Starek.

"Hold out your hand, let him sniff it," said Florence.

Starek obeyed and the cat started to rub his head against the offering. In a matter of moments Claudius was on Starek's lap, his forepaws resting against the Vulcan's chest, and he was rubbing his head against Starek's chin. Florence tapped Jim's arm and indicated the kitchen. Cat and child did not notice them leave.

"A Claws Encounter of the Furred Kind," said Florence as Jim closed the door. "That'll keep him occupied for a while. You realise that you've got a whole new crop of problems here?"

"How many did you think of?" Jim started pacing up and down the kitchen.

"Well apart from all the nasties that this upset could do to the poor thing, I suspect that he hasn't been treated too well. Oh, nothing simple like physical abuse, just not normally for a child. It can do a lot of damage."

"I can't say I know what normal for a Vulcan is, and I don't think that Spock knows either," responded Jim.

"You'd be surprised. He did just as he ought, handled that conversation real well."

"You thought that was a conversation?"

"I've already told you. These are aliens. It was a genuine attempt at communication, within set Traditional boundaries. Enquiries about family behaviour, learning, personal values from someone assuming a role in which he will be taking on the provision of those items, and responses from a child who accepts the change in roles has taken place. Shouldn't have bombshelled them like that, though, about the English. That could have back fired."

"Good thing you did or I would have put my foot in it and expressed some opinions about Stonn and T'Pring which would have lowered my credit by a long way. What do you mean about assuming a role?"

Florence hitched herself onto a stool out of the way of the man wearing a track on her tiled floor. She figured that he did his best thinking when pacing and wanted to give his arms plenty of windmill room too.

"Spock hasn't said anything yet, but he will, when he realises that he has to

explain it to you. By removing Starek from T'Pring and Stonn he's placed himself in the position of parental responsibility, and the fact that the kid is here and not with them shows that they have accepted it too. Vulcan law is a lot more immediate than our way of justice. Spock is now Father to Starek, with all that entails under the Vulcan way of life, the universe and everything. If Sarek continues to reject Starek then Spock won't have many choices open to him. It may well be that he's going to end up going back to Vulcan to raise that kid!"

Jim grimaced. "I guessed as much. He really empathises with him. The way that kid was hanging onto him, like he'd never been hugged. You know I'm even beginning to feel sorry for Stonn!"

"That creep? Why?" Florence asked with disgust.

Jim waved his hands about. "Well if you think of what T'Pring's done to him. The poor sap thinks that he's fathered a child. I know how that feels. It's like you've just been handed the universe."

He looked away as thoughts of Miramanee threatened to clog his vocal chords. In a voice roughened by grief for her loss he continued.

"But instead of joy he's had T'Pring holding it over his head all this time. He knew that Spock was to be her husband but he went ahead with the relationship anyway, which was totally against all Tradition, so he must have been really smitten with her. He gets all set up to Challenge, to kill Spock in order to cover up their affair; then she chooses me and he hears her say that he was weak and easily controlled - not a particularly nice thing to hear on your wedding day from your bride. Then Starek gets born and there is the living symbol of all those dastardly deeds, sitting down with him at

every meal. Being a father under those circumstances would have been hell, and now to find out that his son isn't his at all!"

"If you put it like that, I suppose he hasn't had it easy, but I feel sorrier for Starek. Having a total wimp for a father must have been bad. Having that cold-hearted calculating ice cube for a mother. Urgh!" Florence shuddered expressively. "Hey, she's been here on Avalon for years, the whole family has. There aren't many indigenous Vulcan species here for her to study, are there? I wonder what she's been doing?"

"Not playing the tender loving mother, that's for sure. I hope Amanda can talk some sense into Sarek. If she doesn't Spock will put Starek's welfare first. Sounds selfish, doesn't it."

"Sounds Human. Put that coffee on the stove the next time you orbit by it. One thing about all children everywhere, they are always ready to eat." Kirk's stomach sounded a complaining gurgle. "And I know a Starship Captain who didn't have any breakfast or dinner today."

The crew of the Surak noted the visible signs of anger and passed word rapidly about that Sarek of Vulcan and his wife were to be left strictly alone. As ever the rapid change in the activities of the Vulcans who normally worked with her husband was a source of amusement to Amanda. She was far less amused at Sarek's attitude, and determined to put into action his request of the previous night, that she maintain her own opinion on Family matters. Sarek hadn't yet asked her opinion about Starek, he'd just assumed it would be the same as his. In that he was wrong, and this time she would not bend to his decree.

"You reject Starek?" she asked, once they were safely back in their sound proof quarters.

"Of course!"

"Why?"

"The reasons are obvious."

"Not to me they're not. Explain them to me?" she invited as she settled herself into a seat and braced herself for the argument that was about to erupt.

"There is no need for me to explain anything."

"I think that there is." The blatant challenge in her answer was too obvious for Sarek to ignore.

"I do not need to explain myself to you, wife!"

Amanda's chin lifted slightly. "I thought that we were a partnership. Perhaps I have been wrong for all these years. You give the orders and I obey, just like a good little Vulcan wife should. Yet last night you told me that I should hold to my opinion and not simply accept yours. You told me that you wanted me to have my own opinion. Now the first time that I express a need to know why you have decided on a course of action it's back to 'WIFE!'. Not this time, Sarek; this is too important."

Sarek glared at her then ground out, "You will obey me."

"No."

Sarek blinked rapidly then. "What did you say?"

"I said 'no'. Not this time. I want, I need, to discuss these events with you."

"There is nothing to discuss." Amanda flinched as Sarek shouted out his answer but kept her voice low and level when she replied.

"Very well. Then you can listen to my decision. Spock has taken charge of Starek and will therefore be responsible for his future. He will have to look after the child. I intend to help him."

"I forbid it."

"I don't accept your authority to forbid me because there are no grounds for it. I have raised one child on Vulcan and he turned out pretty good. I have experience to help me with this one and I don't intend to make the same mistakes."

"You are my wife and you will obey me."

"I will not, not in this matter. If you wish to arrange for another mate, then I accept your right to choose another. For my part I will not require you to find me another mate. Shall I call The Refuge and ask T'Pau to arrange a mate for you? She has one immediately available. T'Pring."

The revulsion was instinctive and immediate. "No, not with such a one."

"Yet you expected Spock to be content with such a one. Is that why you reject Starek, because his mother is T'Pring?"

Sarek drew a deep, shuddering breath. "She is without honour."

"Her child is a separate entity and can not be held responsible for the actions of his mother. He is, possibly, your child. If you think it even remotely possible for a child to inherit the characteristics of a parent then remember that!"

"His parentage is not yet proved."

Knowing when not to push her luck Amanda offered a choice, conciliation. "Then wait until his paternity is proved before you reject him. If he is not your son that he can have no claim on you. If he is, then decisions about his future should only be made when you can consider them rationally."

Sarek glowered at her. "You think my judgement is affected?"

"It has been every other time." The adroit reminder of all their years together tipped the scales and the glare decreased slightly.

"You risk much for the child."

Amanda left her seat and walked to where Sarek was standing. "I risk nothing for the child. I only seek to protect you. Decisions made now can not be sensible. We will discuss this matter at a more appropriate time. I think that we have more personal matters of more immediate interest?" Her voice trailed away as Sarek proved that he accepted her opinion in this matter.

Events at Florence's house were not going as smoothly. Claudius had managed to divert Starek's attention from his changed circumstances for several hours but even a cat's attention span has to run out eventually, and Claudius had left to go wherever cats go when they feel like going for a walk. Starek sat very still and was very quiet after Claudius left. The majority of conversational gambits made by Jim and Florence came to nothing, then Jim had the idea of offering Starek the use of a linkage into the computer aboard the Enterprise to access the teaching programs that Spock maintained there.

Within minutes Starek was

engrossed in a program of mathematical puzzles, and Jim and Florence retreated out of earshot to relax.

"Is it wise to let him play around with the Big E's computers?"

"I think so. I logged him in at the lowest access level, and Spock put together the security system. It'll take him a few years to get as good as Spock at busting into things."

Florence smiled at Jim. "So, Captain Hero, have I convinced you that aliens are different?"

"Absolutely. Did you have to try so hard?"

They laughed at each other and relaxed in companionable silence for a long, peaceful time, which was eventually broken by the sound of the door chime.

"I'll get it." Jim heaved himself out of his chair and let Jo in from the shelter of the transparent porch. Rain glistened on her cloak and from the hair of her fringe.

"Oh but it's cold out there. Any colder and it's going to start snowing on us. I understand that I've been missing all the fun?" she asked as Jim helped her unwind the heavy material from about her person.

He grinned at her. "There have been a few developments," he confirmed as he hung the cloak up.

She moved across the living room and held out her hands to the fire, rubbing them together to warm them, then she smiled at Florence and resumed her now favourite seat, tucking her legs underneath her on the sofa.

"Your Dad tracked you down?" asked Florence.

"Yes, but he couldn't really say that much, it was a public line. So tell me, what happened?"

Florence and Jim made sighing noises. "It's a little difficult to know where to start," said Jim.

"Okay, start with telling me who Starek is," suggested Jo. "Dad said that he was here."

"Well, Starek is the child that T'Pring was pregnant with when she Challenged Spock the first time. Stonn thought that he was the father but your father found out that Starek has T-Negative blood, which makes it impossible for Stonn to be his daddy, and Spock thinks that Sarek is. I'm still not too sure why he jumped to that conclusion, but your father has gone off to the Enterprise to work up a gene map to find out for sure, and Sarek has gone off in a huff and Amanda went with him, and Spock has gone to bed because his hormone levels are up again, and Florence and I are baby-sitting Starek." Jim smiled brightly at her. "Okay so far?"

Jo rubbed at her face. "If Starek is here, then Spock adopted him?"

"Yep," said Florence. "Killer, ain't it?"

"That could put Sarek into a huff."

"That weren't the real reason," corrected Florence. "He's in a delicate condition at the moment."

"Him too! Is it catching or what?"

"Maybe, but he's had to work through it the Traditional way. Can you check up on Spock? The new improved

method seems to be taking a bit of a battering at the moment." Florence waved towards the staircase.

"Dad asked me to. He said that Spock and T'Pring were still linked, and that she was getting at Spock through the link. Once Spock breaks the link then the new improved method should work, no problem. How do you feel, Jim?"

"Me? I'm fine."

Jo waved a tricorder over him to check the statement. "Absolutely right. I wouldn't want you keeling over during a date."

"Date, what date?" asked Florence as Jo got up, shook out the leg she'd been sitting on and stood waiting for the numbness and the pins and needles to wear off.

"How did you know I'd made arrangements for tonight?" asked Jim suspiciously.

Jo counted on her fingers. "One, your reputation. Two, there was a very pleasant woman at the Christmas Day Ball. Three, you went back to the Ball after we left here. Four, your reputation. Five, the rumour mill on Avalon, which is every bit as good as the one on the Enterprise. Six, your reputation."

"I get the message," said Jim.

"Why didn't you say that you wanted to go out tonight?" demanded Florence.

"We were baby-sitting," protested Jim.

"I can manage one kid, especially when he's that well behaved. You should see the hellions that I've got for great grandchildren; I think that they wouldn't

be out of place in the Klingon Empire!"

"And I'm going to stay here and get all the details about what's been going on today, and meet Starek. I'm curious," added Jo. "What time were you going to meet her?"

"In about an hour."

"Better go and get changed and be off then," chided Jo. "You do have a reputation to maintain."

Glaring at her Jim led the way down the stairs and went to shower and change while Jo checked Spock. He rejoined the two women who clucked at him and made appreciative comments about his clothes. Jim took the teasing in good part and waited for a lull before asking,

"How's Spock doing? Do you think I'll be needed?"

Jo shook her head. "I doubt it, Jim. His hormone levels are about the same as the last time Dad checked him. You go out and have a good time."

"If you're sure?"

"Positive. Go and have a good time."

"Florence?"

"Take the trundler and go!"

Jim smiled at them, blew them both kisses and left. Jo looked at Florence. "So? Start talking!"

Sarek woke from his nightmare of fire to find himself once again standing a metre from the foot of his bed which contained his wife, who regarded him with amused affection and patted the

mattress beside her.

"Come back here, Sarek," she suggested.

Sarek gathered up the rags of his dignity and climbed back under the bed covers. "I apologise for waking you."

"Apology accepted. Go back to sleep. We've got a lot to do tomorrow."

"Later on today," corrected Sarek.

"Hmmm," murmured Amanda, draping an arm over his chest.

Sarek lay still and listened to her breathing quieten and deepen as she went back to sleep. He tried to conjure up the correct attitude to summon sleep, then decided to abandon the attempt. He was wide awake, and if he enforced sleep on himself he knew that he would only suffer a recurrence of the fire nightmare. Instead he concentrated on trying to think logically about the situation that his Family now found itself in. So much depended on the results from the gene maps that McCoy was preparing. Spock seemed so sure that T'Pol had raided the Vaults of Tomorrow. That Starek was his child.

The meagre data that Spock had related seemed not to support such a definite conclusion, and yet Spock seemed so sure. So sure that he had removed Starek from Stonn and T'Pol's care. Sarek worried at the fact that Spock had been so sure. He reflected on his own behaviour, acknowledged that his lack of control could only partly be explained by Pon Farr, and wondered at his precipitate flight from Florence's house. He found that he wanted to know what else Spock would have told him, if he had stayed.

Sarek closed his eyes and tried to calm his agitation, tried to understand

why it was he was becoming so affected now, when there was no longer any need for concern. The logical answer was that there was a reason for his unease, and that as his thoughts kept turning to Spock, then Spock must be the reason. He applied the correct mental disciplines and sought entry to the Familial Link. It took him some while to achieve entry, and he found himself in the maze of mental linkages strangely barren of activity. Which was not so strange when he considered it, because relatively few of his Family were here on Avalon.

He found Spock with no difficulty. The orientation to his own position was just as it had been when he had used the Link to check on Spock's wellbeing when Spock had been a baby. The entity that was Spock was clad in tight shields and seemed to be sleeping soundly. Sarek cast around cautiously and found a second entity, a much smaller one, in close alignment with Spock and clad in equally tight shields. Sarek sampled the signature of the entity. It was unlike any he had previously met, and yet was obviously a close relative. He considered the second entity. This was Starek. From his position in the Link, his close alignment to Spock and to Sarek, the obvious implication was the one that Spock had made. One that would not have been obvious when Spock was at Gol or aboard the Enterprise and Starek was here on Avalon. The distances involved would have made mental contact an impossibility.

Sarek considered the two, then approached Spock more closely. There seemed to be something not exactly wrong, but then again, not quite right with the quality of his shield. The smoothness seemed to be rippling. As Sarek watched a bulge appeared, reached out towards him and then retracted, only to pulse outwards again. Then the bulge ripped opened and a surge of energy

lashed out at him, a smaller tendril flicked the entity that was Starek, then Sarek fled from the maze. With a vocalised yell Sarek again tumbled off the bed, waved on the lights and hit the Comms. link with one continuous movement.

"Bridge here. Ambassador?"

"Prepare to beam me down to the coordinates that I was beamed up from last."

"Sir, Starfleet has requested that we do not use the Transporter."

"I will be in the Transporter Room in four minutes. Ensure that all is prepared for me. Sarek out."

He hit the off switch. Amanda sat up and watched in sleepy bewilderment as Sarek shed his night clothes and dragged on a set of travel clothes.

"What is on fire now, dear?"

Sarek stamped into his boots, snatched up a cape, said curtly, "Spock is!" and left in a swirl of cloth.

"Spock is? Spock is, is he?"

Amanda reached out and signalled the Bridge who acknowledged with the same promptness.

"Prepare the Transporter Room for me. Same coordinates as my husband."

"At once, Lady Amanda. The Ambassador has already beamed down." The voice conveyed a hint of concern. It would not do for any Vulcan, let alone an Ambassador, to be running around on a planet full of alien beings in a less than perfect state of control.

"It's a Family emergency. Amanda out."

Amanda dressed hurriedly, looped her long hair back into a simple knot, snatched up her own cape and left, muttering.

Sarek leaned on the door chime, sending it ringing continuously. He guessed that there was no way to force an entry into Florence's house so he had either to attract the attention of someone in the house or else request the assistance of the Starfleet Security Team that he had noticed earlier. He knew that only Florence or Kirk would be able to respond. From what he had seen in the Familial link Spock and Starek would be beyond physical response. After what seemed an age, but what his time sense duly recorded as being only forty-seven seconds, the inner door dilated and a sleep-rumpled Kirk, clad only in pyjama bottoms, peered blearily at him.

"What? Ambassador?"

"Open the door, Kirk. Spock is in need of my help!"

Kirk instinctively made to turn away, to go to Spock, and Sarek cracked out, "Open the door!"

Kirk did so and was swept aside as Sarek rushed by him and downstairs to the guest quarters, zeroing in on the distress issuing from Spock. Florence peered round her bedroom door.

"What's going on?"

"It's Sarek. He said that there's something wrong with Spock."

"The next time my family invites me to spend Christmas with them, I'm going to accept. A girl can have too much fun." But she was complaining to an empty lounge as Kirk had plunged down the stairs after Sarek.

Following the mental trace Sarek headed straight for Spock's room. He found Spock collapsed on the floor with Starek bending over him, trying to untangle him from the bed clothes.

"She's hurting him! Make her stop!" demanded the child, his face wet with tears. Sarek knelt down and turned Spock over, cradling him with one arm against his chest as his hand sought out the contact points on Spock's face.

And he found himself crouched in the shadows outside of the massive stones which formed the Koon-ut-Kal-if-Fee of the House of Surak. He froze there, terror stoked by the fires of the Time locking his limbs into total inaction. The hot winds of the desert drew the moisture from his face as he burrowed against the foot of the monolith, the dry sands covered his hands and the scent of ceremonial herbs tickled at his nostrils. The sound of the wind chimes rang discordantly in his ears, then a voice sent him shuddering. It was icy, the pronunciation was precise, the diction perfect, and he found that he hated the speaker with every atom of his being.

"Thee are not behaving in a logical manner."

Thinking himself addressed Sarek looked around for the woman who had spoken, but he could see no one, only the long empty stretches of sand dunes and the glory of the stars that was the night sky of Vulcan.

"I perceive no logic in betraying my House to one such as you."

Sarek recognised Spock's voice. The conversation was taking place on the other side of the monolith, inside the circle of the stones.

"I could ease thy fires."

"You caused them." The accusation was bitter.

"Of course I did. Just as I did the first time." The tone was dismissive. "Do not worry. Thy Thy'la can quench them for thee, and I will give succour to thy Father."

"He will never turn to one such as you." The answer was defiant.

"I believe that he will. No wife will accept a Time promoted by one outside the Bond. She will stand aside, in my favour. It is Custom, and the House of Surak abides by Custom." The voice was taunting Spock.

Sarek edged forwards, and peeped around the stone into the arena. Spock, at least the image of him, was huddled against the base of the fire pit, the flames leaping and quivering from the rim above his head.

"Thy Father burns, even as thee does."

"You have tampered with the Familial Link. For that there can be no excuse."

"Excuse? I need no excuse. It is necessary. If I cannot have thee in marriage, I will take him. I will be a fit consort for such a man. Have I not provided him with a worthy heir? I paid great attention to health and intelligence when I made my selections from the Vaults of Tomorrow. I will be able to provide many such offspring for him. I am young, I will provide a proper household, one fit for the Heir of Surak."

Sarek sat back into the shadows. The woman talking was T'Pring. She was walking around the fire pit, just at the edge of the light it cast, reminding Sarek of a patient predator stalking a prey that

could not escape. As if to echo his thoughts T'Pring attempted to edge nearer Spock, who recoiled. She resumed her pacing.

"It is only a matter of time," she explained with a detachment that Sarek found totally repugnant. "Thee cannot protect thyself, thy Father and thy brother. By choosing to protect them thee will submit thyself to my will, and when thee has broken I will leave thee to burn."

Sarek saw the image of Spock stiffen and press back against the wall, and T'Pring approached him.

"Thee weakens, and Sarek already burns. It is illogical to delay the inevitable, to cause thyself such pain and danger. If thee allows me to pass I will not cause thee further acceleration. Thee will be able to reach Vulcan in time to find a mate."

"You are causing the pain. You are the danger." The image of Spock had its eyes closed, and Sarek could see the lines etched into his face.

"When I am thy Father's consort thee will wish that those words were not spoken. He will give to Sarek the House of Surak, and thee will be as nothing to him."

Sarek leaned against the stone and shivered. T'Pring's voice, her face, remained perfectly calm, perfectly controlled. He thought of surrendering to her, attempting to seek comfort and ease during the Time in her glacial embrace, and found himself revolted by only the notion. He wanted Amanda, the acceptance and commitment that she had freely bestowed, the marvellous way that she had of making the Time so much less threatening, so incidental to the real business of his life. Quite suddenly he called to mind the first of the Times, the

overwhelming terrors he had experienced as control of his mind slipped away from him, terror despite the support of his father and his T'hy'la. The distance that had remained between his first partner and himself despite all that they had both done to narrow the gulf that had separated them.

He tried to reject the images that replayed themselves, to ignore the insidious knowledge that Spock had had no support other than the fumblingly pitiful attempts of his Human T'hy'la; that T'Pring had been allowed to make the terror of the Time hideous for his son, and to corrupt the second Time too; that he had allowed this to happen to his son. And above and beyond all this was the clear realisation that Spock was quite willing to risk a third Time, with all the dangers attendant when no mate was available, in order to protect his father and his brother from T'Pring.

Suddenly so angry that he was calm, Sarek eased his way round the outside of the Koon-ut-Kal-if-Fee, keeping to the shadows, stalking the predator who threatened his children. T'Pring was still talking, still reasoning with Spock, attempting to show him why she was acting as she was, why his continued stubborn resistance was so futile. Sarek nodded in agreement. All of the arguments were carefully composed, flawlessly logical and he rejected them as totally as Spock was doing. He crouched, waiting for his chance.

T'Pring made a sudden lunge, and Spock rolled away from the fire pit, under her body and out onto the sands of the Arena. The effort of the mental battle of wills showed clearly for a moment as the framework of the stones shivered like a reflection in disturbed water, then the outline firmed. T'Pring stood up, brushing sand from her clothes and surveyed the Koon-ut-Kal-if-Fee from her

new vantage point. Spock remained curled up on the sand, hugging his pain, his breathing harsh in the silence.

"Thee are stronger than I thought thee could be. Thee has obviously benefitted from thy stay at Gol. The training of the Masters has firmed thy shields to a degree which I find to be most commendable. Thee must realise now that thee cannot withstand me. I have only to reach the correct place and I will gain access to thy Familial Link, and thy Father. Thee can not continue to hide it from me. I think that he will make a far more suitable mate than thee. Thee are proving to be too stubborn. I prefer a degree of compliance in my mates."

"I will never permit it." Spock's voice sounded weaker, but no less determined. Sarek glanced upwards, realising that something was missing. The stars had gone.

"Thee knows that thee cannot prevent it, unless thee force me from thy mind and destroy the childhood bond link. But thee will not do that. Thee has been taught too well. Thee has too great a reverence for life. Thee knows that the forcible breaking of the bond will cause me harm, and thee cannot do that. Not even to save thy Father."

Spock sat up. The movements were slow, laboured. "You are wrong, T'Pring."

"I think not. Thee will not cause harm, not even to me."

As Spock gathered himself to make the effort to eject T'Pring from his mind Sarek slipped out of hiding and dived across the sands to join his will to that of his son. Their energies lashed out at the site of the childhood bond link and smashed into it. The remnants went, simply and without fuss, just like a soap

bubble vanishing. A heartbeat later the Koon-ut-Kal-if-Fee vanished too, leaving behind a misty indeterminate area that Sarek could not maintain a hold on. Gently the mind of his son expelled him and he found himself back in the guest bedroom of Florence Rood's house with his son lying limply in his arms. Sarek reached out and dragged the covers clear of the bed and Spock, and hauled his son onto the bed, arranging him in what he hoped was a comfortable position before shaking the covers into order and replacing them over Spock.

Spock's breathing was deep and even, and his pulse rate seemed to be slowing, as if he had been engaged in some strenuous activity, which was precisely what he had been doing. Sarek sat on the end of the bed for several minutes, waiting for his own heart rate to begin to normalise, then he looked at Spock again. His son's face was too old for his few years, and there was too much starlight mixed in with the midnight of his hair. Separation from Vulcan, and Gol, had not been kind to Spock. In the silence of the guest room on a planet lightyears from their home Sarek finally admitted to the futility of his behaviour towards his son, and acknowledged all that he had missed by his too-rigid adherence to Tradition and Custom, which had meant so much to him, and which seemed to mean so little to so many others. This, he realised, was the first time that he had ever tucked Spock up in bed.

Another thought occurred to him and he looked around the bedroom for Starek. The child was not there.

Finding the other guest rooms unoccupied Sarek went upstairs to the living room, where he received the full and immediate attention of the three Humans present.

"Spock is sleeping," he announced.

"And T'Pring?" demanded Jim Kirk.

Sarek sat down before asking carefully, "How do you know T'Pring was involved?"

"Starek told us. He said she was attacking the three of you through the Familial Link."

Sarek looked at his wife. Starek was asleep in her arms, a comfortable tidy bundle of relaxed contentment. Amanda was smiling down at him.

"What else did he say?"

"Only that he couldn't help Spock so he'd tried to rouse you."

"He didn't know how to reach you, Sarek," explained Amanda. "He knew how to reach the Familial Link but there's never been anyone else there before. He only recognised you as you because he saw Spock trying to protect you from T'Pring's attack."

"What happened to T'Pring?" repeated Kirk.

"She has been rebuffed, and the childhood bond link has been destroyed. She will not act against Spock again. I think that we should leave now, Amanda; we have disturbed this house for long enough."

Amanda looked at the child sleeping in her arms and then up at her husband. Kirk interrupted whatever she was about to say.

"Here, I'll take him."

He bent and scooped up Starek, arranging the sleeping child carefully in his arms and cuddling him to his chest.

Starek's only response was to move his head slightly into a more comfortable position.

"I'll rig up something in my room for the rest of the night, in case he wakes up and wants something." Jim Kirk looked a challenge at Sarek.

"Of course." Amanda left without a backwards glance

Sarek merely nodded then said, "I understand that Leonard is working up a gene map. He expected it to be ready later today. I will - we will - return and listen to the results of his investigations."

"I'll tell Spock that you'll be here," confirmed Kirk.

Florence shut the door and leaned against the wall, dramatically wiping her brow. "You really enjoy dicing with death, don't you?"

"What did you expect me to do? Let them walk off with Starek? Amanda would have, you know, and Sarek would have let her, and then where would we have been? From what you said Spock has taken responsibility for this child. Until he says otherwise Starek stays here. Goodnight, Florence."

Florence regarded the squared shoulders and retreating back with interest, and went to bed with an evil smirk on her face. By her calculations Kirk's drooping pyjama trousers would lose the battle with gravity when he was eight steps from the bottom of the stairs. She turned out the light. He was the resourceful, capable Captain of the flagship of the United Federation of Planets. He'd figure something out.

THE DAY AFTER BOXING DAY

The day dawned cold, wet and miserable. The 'Fleet Security team that was watching Florence Rood's house waited with unusual attention for the next development in the saga. They didn't know what was going on, and the betting was heavy that they never would, but the comings and goings involving the command team of the Enterprise, the Vulcan Ambassador and Jo McCoy were serving to enliven what would otherwise have been a very dull Christmas duty. They were not disappointed. The sparkle of a Transporter beam coalesced into the Vulcan Ambassador and his lady and they hurried to the shelter of the entry, the heavy rain driving into their cloaks.

They were admitted by Captain Kirk, who waved a cheery good morning to the team and went back inside.

Jim took the wet clothing and went to hang it up, leaving Florence to look after the visitors.

"Florence, I think that we're a little early," said Amanda.

"Yep. But then you were here even earlier, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Good thing that I don't need that much sleep any more. Are you two going to sit down or are you just going to stand there?"

Amanda chuckled, grabbed Sarek's hand, and towed him across the room to the sofa that she'd used earlier. "Has Leonard arrived yet with the results?"

"Not yet." Kirk rejoined them. "We got a call about 10 minutes ago. He said that he'd finished the maps, and that he was going to go to Jo's house to shower

and change before he brought them over." talking to each other."

"Did he give any indications of the results?" asked Sarek.

"He was being watched by several of the Dockyard personnel so he couldn't really say too much. I think that they've been trying to get rid of him all night. He did say that there were no surprises."

"Then Spock was correct," said Sarek.

"Seems that way." Kirk's stomach gurgled in the reflective pause that followed, and Amanda laughed at the look of chagrin on his face.

Florence echoed the chuckle. "This kid is better than any alarm clock. That was the call to fix breakfast. Jim, you go root out the Vulcans, it's about time that pair were up."

Jim shrugged and trotted off downstairs. Florence went out into the kitchen where she was soon joined by Amanda.

"How stable is Sarek?" Florence wasted no time in coming to the point.

"Now that T'Pring is no longer attacking him, he's returning to normal. This has come as a big shock to him." Amanda took several packages from Florence and started preparing the meal.

"Can't say that it's been much of a picnic for Spock or Starek."

"No, it can't have been. I just wonder what we're going to do."

"Do?"

"So many potential quarrel points. So many ways the future could go. So much depends on Spock and Sarek

Florence added some more packages to the pile. "Guess they never learned how?"

"No, they never did," Amanda said sadly, then smiled mischievously at Florence. "But I've decided they are going to learn how today. Because if they don't, I'm going to talk to them!"

"Just think. If I'd gone with my family I'd have missed all this fun."

"The fun ain't hardly started yet. If I play my cards right, Sarek and Spock are going to find themselves on the same side."

"Who's the opposition?"

"The Family, who else?"

Jim reappeared in the living room to find Sarek the sole possessor. Keeping in mind the image from the night before, that of Sarek cradling Spock gently in his arms as he melded with his son, he decided on boldness.

"Are you going to reject Starek?"

Sarek considered the question and decided to answer. "No. He is my son. I will acknowledge him."

"Then I guess that you'll get a bonus. Spock back on Vulcan and a second son too."

"Why would Spock return to Vulcan?"

"To raise Starek. Didn't I get that bit of Tradition right? That by taking Starek away from T'Pring and Stonn, and them allowing it, that Spock has become Starek's parent."

Sarek acquired a stuffed and thoughtful look, then raised an eyebrow. "I had not considered that he might do so."

"He's a great one for doing the right thing. He'll do what he thinks is best for Starek, even if it means junking the last twenty years of his life. Of course Starfleet will offer him a position on Vulcan, we wouldn't want to lose such a valuable officer, but I dare say that he'll resign and get a job at that Science Academy that's always trying to recruit him."

Kirk walked over to lean against the frame of the French window and looked out at the rain-swept garden.

"Why would he leave Starfleet?"

"So that Starek would have a father with a career that was acceptable to other Vulcans. He'll want to minimise the differences, blend into the fabric of Vulcan society so that Starek will be accepted by his peers. Bet he'll even get married. Not that he has to. He's the first Vulcan ever to be free of Pon Farr. Ironic, isn't it? Free, and still trapped by T'Pring."

Kirk watched Sarek's reflection in the window. He was playing a risky game but he felt that he had to in order to protect Spock, and to give Starek the best chance of getting a new family.

"There are those amongst my people who say that Terrans cannot apply logic to resolve a situation. I have been attempting to explain to them that Terran logic is not the same as Vulcan logic."

Kirk grinned appreciatively. "Is that why you married Amanda, to find out about Terran logic, that being the logical thing to do at the time?"

Sarek's temper flared briefly, then he realised that this Human was daring to tease him. "One thing that I quickly learned was that that term, as I understood it, could not be applied to Terrans."

"What terms could be applied?"

Sarek drew in a breath. "Irritating, facile, superficial, devious."

A pair of entirely feminine arms wound themselves about Sarek's neck and cool lips brushed the tip of his right ear. "Adorable," he continued without pause. "Fascinating."

Kirk watched the reflection in the window and dared one last tease. "Have you ever researched the origin of that word?"

Amanda laughed. "I explained it to him. Languages are my specialty."

Kirk removed himself with as much dignity as he could muster and found that the low, throaty chuckle followed him out into the brightness of the kitchen. Florence noted the scarlet cheeks and grinned.

"Talking with Daddy?"

"I was doing okay, until Amanda joined in."

"Amanda does not like to lose, and let's face it, she's had to fight to keep Sarek."

Kirk's head came round and he stared at Florence.

"This isn't the first time that a woman has tried to edge her out. The others have been more discreet. After all, Sarek is a PRIZE. Young, healthy, very intelligent. Just the sort of biology that

you'd pick for the other half of the gene match."

"Oh."

"I wouldn't worry. From what Sarek said father and son have seen T'Pring off. And Amanda has a secret weapon that hasn't failed her yet. The others don't have anything that can match it."

"What's that?"

"Love. Just love. That lasting sort that keeps people married to each other for forty-odd years. Never found it myself. At least I might have done... he died."

Kirk winced, thinking of Lori, then further back into time to a land of pine trees, sunlight and laughter. He said sombrely, "I know the feeling."

The pair busied themselves with preparing breakfast while they recovered their composure. They left it keeping hot and went back into the living room to find that Sarek had emerged from the guest rooms and that both McCoy's had arrived.

Leonard was talking to Amanda and Sarek while Sarek watched them with ill concealed anxiety.

"There is no doubt. Morning, Jim, Florence. You are Sarek's father, no possible chance of any other conclusion. Anyone who can read a gene map will tell you the same thing. T'Pring did use some material from the Vaults of Tomorrow. Their security must be full of holes."

Sarek looked at the printed sheets that McCoy had handed to him. "I understand that the security system involves excluding anyone who does not

have authorisation to enter the complex. It would be assumed that any Vulcan with authority to enter the complex and who had clearance to access materials stored in the building would be ethical and not tamper with the materials stored there."

"There's that different logic again," quipped Jim.

Sarek merely nodded his agreement, still concentrating on the information. Then he looked at Starek. "You are my son. No fault or blame is attached to you in any way. I will discuss your future with Spock." He paused, looked at Amanda's wooden expression, swallowed, then said, "Amanda and I will discuss your future with Spock, and with you."

Amanda smiled at the serious little face regarding her with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity that she found altogether endearing. "I know we met this morning but I don't think that we were formally introduced. I'm Amanda Grayson, your father's wife."

Sarek blinked. "I give thee greetings, wife of my father."

"You have a question?"

"Yes, Honoured Lady."

"Then you have my permission to ask it."

Sarek looked from her to Sarek, patently gauging if he dared to do so, then, "Honoured Lady, it states in the History files that the miniaturised version of the Universal Translator was developed at the Vulcan Science Academy by Doctor Rood and Professor Grayson."

"And you want to know if that's

us?" asked Florence.

"Yes, Honoured Lady."

"Told you yesterday. You may call me Florence. Honoured Lady makes me feel old."

"But you are old," protested Starek.

"I may be old, but I don't have to feel old, and yes, Amanda and I did put together the Translator."

Kirk grinned. "I knew there had to be a good reason for Sarek putting up with you, Florence."

"Listen, Kirk..."

Whatever information she was going to impart to him was abruptly interrupted by Spock appearing at the top of the stairs and uttering a terse and impolite, "May I see the gene map?"

Sarek handed the records over and Spock, ignoring the audience he had achieved, concentrated his attention solely on the sheets in his hand. After several minutes of intense scrutiny he murmured, "Fascinating."

"I think that I am going to murder my offspring," stated Amanda quietly.

Spock ignored her, his mind still focused on the gene map and its ramifications.

"Oh I give up!"

Spock started slightly, and turned in time to view Amanda's departure. He looked at Sarek, who shrugged. "She is not as calm as she normally is."

"The cause is sufficient."

"What else did you notice, Spock?"

asked Kirk.

Spock tried to 'look innocent' and Kirk wagged an admonishing finger at him. "You knew about Starek and Sarek last night so it can't be that that has you standing in the middle of the living room, in your pyjamas, muttering 'Fascinating'."

Spock looked at Kirk, then looked at Sarek.

"Within the Family, Spock," his Father commented.

"I think that this should be discussed in privacy."

Starek looked from one to the other. "Sirs, if this concerns me then I think that it should be spoken here. All here are Family, are they not?"

Amanda returned from the kitchen, flung a robe at Spock and said, "I agree. This obviously affects us all."

Spock slipped into the robe. "It occurred to me that I had not fully analysed the behaviour of the involved parties correctly."

"In what way were we incorrect?" inquired Sarek.

"Perhaps incorrect is imprecise. We have not yet explored the situation to its full potential."

Kirk noted a slight shiver and looped a friendly arm about Starek, pulling the child until he was seated next to him in one of the enormous arm chairs.

"You'll get used to Spock," he commented. "He's long-winded but he'll get there in the end."

Starek received the blazing smile at close quarters and raised an eyebrow.

The smile got wider. "Analyse away, Spock, you've got our undivided attention."

The McCoys shared a chair and Florence sat down on the other. "Here we go again," she announced.

"Stonn is not the biological father of Starek. The gene map shows this clearly and from it we can be certain that his biological father is Sarek. We also assume that T'Pring obtained the 'source' material from the Vaults of Tomorrow, to which she has access. The comments that T'Pring made add weight to this line of reasoning."

Spock paused, looked thoughtful then, "If we assume that T'Pring is operating to a logical campaign then, given her undoubted abilities, it is possible that the plan is more complex than we have assumed."

Kirk leaned forwards. "You think she made contingency plans?"

"If she acted within the parameters of her character, there seems little doubt. She did so when she Challenged me. Why not arrange others?"

"But what else could she do?" asked Amanda.

"Let us examine her objectives," suggested Spock.

"To be free of you," said Kirk, addressing Spock.

"In part."

"Not as simple as that," contradicted Sarek. "Had she merely wished not to be Spock's consort then she only had to find a willing replacement; and there would have been a wide selection for him to chose from."

Spock gaped at his father, mild scorn blending neatly with disbelief that Sarek did actually believe the statement. Kirk had no such compunction and roared with laughter. "Yeah. So many that they were queueing up to marry Spock when he did come on the market."

Amanda was moved to protest, before Sarek's uncertain temper gave way. "But there were. We had covert enquiries from seventeen Families with eligible daughters the first Time, and even more this Time."

"Interesting, then, that T'Pau chose T'Prilia," commented Spock.

"Damned queer if you ask me," stated McCoy bluntly.

"Quite. Let us return to T'Pring's motives. If, as you state, Mother, there were others who were at the time willing to be my consort then there would have been no need for the Challenge, and yet she did Challenge."

"She was already pregnant, wasn't she? Could be she simply didn't expect to have to marry you, or to explain who the father was?" Kirk looked at Sarek, who nodded agreement.

"Stonn was clearly of the impression that he was Starek's father," he said. "It would not have suited T'Pring to explain her meddling so she convinced Stonn to support her in the Challenge to save reputation for them both, although in Stonn's case it was not necessary. Choosing you as Champion was merely opportunist improvisation, to cover the unlikely event of Spock winning the contest against Stonn."

"Wonderful. But why was she pregnant in the first place?" asked Kirk.

"A key question that we have not

yet addressed, and Spock has the answer," said Amanda.

"A supposition only, Mother. If we assume that T'Pring's motivation is power, then Starek, as Sarek's son, becomes important. As heir."

"Heir?" asked Kirk.

"Starfleet is not the safest occupation and I do not have children. If I had died then she would have been in a position to claim my inheritance for Starek. When I went to Gol T'Pring would have believed that her plans would come to a successful conclusion. However, when I left Gol..."

"T'Pring had to recast her plans," continued Amanda. "Marriage."

"To either myself or to Sarek. I was her first option, and when I evaded her, she began to attack Sarek."

"Through you, using the remnants of the Bond Link to access the Family Link," said Sarek. "But you denied her once you realised what she was doing."

Spock looked at Sarek, suspicion dawning, but Kirk cut across the silent interchange before Spock had time to pursue it.

"Okay, I think I've followed all of that. T'Pring would have used Starek after your death to get the power and position that she wanted. Under the recast plan she would have got it either through marriage or motherhood. What did we miss?"

"Motherhood," said Spock succinctly.

Starek stirred and spoke for the first time. "You think that T'Pring is not my biological mother?"

"In exactly the same way that I think that Stonn is not your father," agreed Spock.

"Reasons?" demanded Sarek.

"I can give you one," announced Amanda. "Starek said it last night. He had never encountered any other presences in the Familial Link until we arrived. If T'Pring was a biological relation then at the very least Starek would have met T'Pring, Solen and Stonn, who are all in the same Family."

"Correct, Mother. Also the fact that T'Pring had access to the Vaults of Tomorrow, and so an unlimited choice of possible donors. She said that she made her selections carefully. Selections, not selection. If we are correct in our assumption of her motives, then Starek is the key weapon. A weapon that can be used against more than one is far more valuable, more logical, than a weapon that can only be used against one."

"Once you look for the obvious beyond the obvious. But who?" asked Sarek.

"Father, you know TPau well. Her belief in and her adherence to Tradition are strong. What reason could she have had to ignore Tradition at my first marriage? What reason could she have had to go counter to her own beliefs now? Why did she consent to the marriage between Stonn and T'Prilia, who was her choice for me?"

Sarek looked at Starek. "What if she were not protecting T'Pring, but Starek?"

"TPau?" Amanda's voice swooped and peaked with astonishment in the one word.

Kirk looked horrified. "She married your father, didn't she?" he asked Sarek.

"She was my father's consort a long time ago. There was no biological outcome from the union," commented Sarek thoughtfully. "Considering her heritage and talents she is a commendable choice as biological mother. The political repercussions if it became known that Sarek of Vulcan and the Chancellor T'Pol had an offspring..."

"Damaging?" ventured McCoy.

"Cataclysmic!" stated Jo entering the discussion for the first time. "Even on Vulcan that would be a major upset."

"The threat is of such potential that it would have been sufficient to prevent T'Pol from acting against T'Poling, even to the extent of protecting her. The lesser damage would have been controllable, kept within the Family," said Sarek.

"Wow!" said Kirk, and looked down at Starek. "You okay?"

Starek started, then said, "I do not know that word?"

"James is asking if you are assimilating the information and the shock?" translated Sarek.

Starek blinked several times, then said, "The knowledge will take some time to fully assimilate. The ramifications are complex; but taking an initial evaluation, I prefer T'Pol to be my mother, rather than T'Poling."

"Wise choice. So? What do we do now?" Amanda nudged Sarek when he failed to answer. "What do we do now?"

"We have breakfast and Spock can get dressed," suggested Florence brightly.

"About Starek," persisted Amanda.

Sarek looked at Starek, still seated in

the circle of Kirk's arm. "He can have breakfast too?"

Spock retreated rapidly downstairs as Kirk chuckled. "Maybe you should get dressed too, Starek."

"Absolutely," agreed Amanda. "I wonder... Florence, do you have a fabricator?"

"In the room next to the kitchen." Florence indicated the door.

"Oh good. Let's go pick out some better clothes for you, Starek. C'mon."

"Better clothes?"

"Those you were wearing yesterday were hardly suitable for a son of Sarek to wear." Amanda gestured and Starek, obedient to the gentle urging from Kirk, stood up. "Now, what colours would you like to wear?"

"I have always worn the colour K'nish."

"I didn't ask that. What colours would you *like* to wear?" The door closed behind them.

Florence and Jo said "K'nish?" together, exchanging grins.

"What's so special about K'nish?" asked Leonard, trying to smother a yawn.

"Come and get some coffee. When you're awake we'll tell you the tale of how we redecorated the Engineering Labs." Jo helped Florence herd her father into the kitchen.

Kirk eyed Sarek speculatively. "Second chance?"

Sarek stiffened, then relaxed. This Human had proved his worth and his

value, and he was his son's Thy'la. "It would be extremely foolish of me to make the same mistakes again. I will follow your example."

"My example?"

"Yes. I will teach that tame one the benefits of a little wildness. The sanity that can be found in knowing one's true self, and in being true to one's own self. The true beauty in IDIC is in being different and accepting that, in the knowledge that everyone is different. There is a continuing problem when a child is too conformable, and when a parent does not allow a child to develop to his full potential. Yes, James Kirk, even I can learn from experience."

"I never doubted it for a second, sir. Why else choose you to be an Ambassador?"

"Nobody else wanted the job."

And Kirk had the horrible feeling that Sarek was cracking a joke; or worse, that he was telling the truth.

Breakfast was a silent affair, with everyone thinking about the past and the future. By unspoken arrangement first the McCoys left, Leonard to catch up on some sleep and Jo to report for duty, then Jim left, borrowing Florence's trundler again. Florence explained to Starek that he'd got a hot date, which mystified the young Vulcan, then she vanished into her bedroom.

The four people left gathered in the living room. Sarek decided to speak first; he felt it was his place to do so.

"I apologise for my behaviour yesterday. I was not thinking logically. I am... calmer now and Amanda and I have discussed ways in which we may be of assistance to you and to Starek. We wish

to discuss these with you and determine your views concerning the future."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "I have accepted responsibility for Starek. I will raise him."

Amanda looked at Sarek, who said, "You would leave Starfleet?"

"Yes."

"There would have been a time when I would have approved of that decision," his father said slowly. "I would have welcomed it. I do not do so now. Your destiny is not to be a researcher at the Academy, nor a teacher there. To permit this to happen would be a waste of your life, and your undoubted talents. If it is acceptable to you, Amanda and I will raise Starek, as my son, which there is no doubt that he is."

"That is a most generous offer."

Amanda shook her head. "There's no generosity involved. Starek has been neglected, opportunities denied to him. As Elders of the Family it is our duty to correct this state and to ensure that in future his well being is given the priority that it deserves. Besides, it'll be fun to have a child about the house again."

"Fun?" asked Starek. "I do not know that word?"

The adults exchanged meaningful looks then Spock said, "If it is agreeable to you, Starek, I would wish to accept the offer of Sarek and Amanda. They are good parents. I have reason to know it."

Sarek controlled the wince before it could be noticed. Spock had been sincere in his statement. Sarek found that he was shocked. He could identify so many occasions when he had not been a good parent, or even an adequate one. But as

he had said to Kirk, he could learn from his mistakes.

"If you wish it, sir," said Starek obediently.

"It is not a matter of my wishes. You have the right to be part of the making of this decision as you are the one most affected by what is decided."

Starek's brow creased in concentration. Never before could he remember being asked for his opinion. Things had always been decided for him. Everything, from the colour of his clothes to what food he ate, had been provided. Amanda had had to choose the clothes he now wore when it had become apparent to her that he could not express a preference.

"I have a problem. I do not know how to make a decision. I have never had to do so before." He waited for the retribution that had always followed when he had failed in his duties in some way. It did not materialise. Instead Spock suggested,

"I am sure that Sarek and Amanda will teach you how. Until they do, and until you have learned how to express an opinion, will you accept my decision in this matter?"

Starek looked up and instantly agreed. "Certainly. I believe that I will find living with them far more interesting than living with Stonn and T'Pring."

Sarek breathed deeply. "We will ensure that it is. Now that we have decided this, Spock and I have to visit The Refuge. We have certain Family matters to discuss with T'Pau."

"Don't argue with her," chided Amanda. "Remember your blood pressure!" She turned to Starek. "The

house we have at ShiKahr is very different from The Refuge. From the living room we can see the Sas-a-Shar desert. The room which I think you'll like for your bedroom looks out onto a garden that I have, and beyond you can see the Arlanga Mountains. We don't have a sehlat at the moment, but I think I know of a Family which will have a litter from which we can choose one for you."

Amanda's voice stopped as the inner door closed behind them. Sarek and Spock looked at the drenched vista from the shelter of the porch.

"Spock, have you controlled Pon Farr?"

"Yes, Father, my hormone levels are returned to normal."

"My congratulations. You have accomplished that which has been long sought."

"It is of no value to any other than I. No other Vulcan can utilise the information in the same way that I have to accomplish this. The details are too personal to be effective for anyone else. And the price that has been paid is too high for such a meagre return. So many lives damaged. Stonn, Solen, T'Prilia, T'Pau and Starek."

Sarek instinctively looked over his shoulder, back towards the door and the infinitely precious people in the living room beyond it. "We will make every effort to ensure that Starek is not harmed by the method of his creation, and that he is given all possible opportunities to develop."

"It might be wise to make him your heir."

"No!" Spock twitched at the sheer volume of the answer in the enclosed

space. In a moderated tone Sarek continued, "No. You are my heir. But, until you have children of your own, I have no objection to you naming Starek as your heir."

"If I do that I must ensure that neither T'Pau nor T'Pring interferes in any way with his life."

"I have thought about this and have certain proposals to make to you regarding them."

"I will listen to your proposals."

Sarek pulled out his communicator.

"I thought that Captain Weston had asked you to cease unauthorised Transporter usage?" remarked Spock.

"Being an Ambassador does have some privileges."

NEW YEAR'S EVE

Jerry Weston had a strong sense of *deja vu*. The party was going well, equally as well as the Christmas Day Ball. He was circulating, smiling politely and sipping his tonic and lemon and again worrying about the group of people foregathered at Florence Rood's house.

Sick Vulcans he could understand. He could sympathise with their efforts to hide themselves away - he felt much the same way whenever he got a cold - but now it seemed that some sort of Vulcan Family War had broken out. Kirk was up to his eyes in it, of course. This time he'd been trying to outrun an irate father, in this case the irate father being the senior and highly respected Ambassador who happened to be his First Officer's father. And Leonard McCoy, who'd always been regarded as a stabilising influence on Kirk

had been mixed up in it too, as had his daughter and Florence Rood, although the crazy nonagenarian had a talent for attracting trouble which easily rivalled Kirk's. And it was all raising a few eyebrows because their merry little jig about Avalon over Christmas hadn't been exactly low profile.

There had been some remarkable to-ings and fro-ings about The Refuge, and some interesting rumours, not the least of which was that The Refuge on Avalon had given shelter to no less a personage than the Chancellor of all Vulcan. She had already left Avalon for Vulcan, using the Surak for transport, and taking with her Solen's daughter who, it seemed, was ill.

This had been confirmed by Solen, who had come to Jerry's office and formally apologised for the strange messages which had been sent to Starfleet concerning Spock's resignation and his marriage. These, he had explained, had been sent by T'Pring who had suffered a mental aberration, mercifully rare amongst Vulcans. She was being escorted back to Vulcan where she would be cared for. Personally Jerry was hard put to believe a word of it, especially after listening to the high-speed cross-talk that had taken place between Amanda and Jim Kirk in his office. Officially he had accepted the explanation and had expressed the hope that T'Pring would recover. Solen had looked resigned when he said that there was little chance that his daughter would ever recover sufficiently to be permitted to leave Gol.

Solen was already present at the Ball, and had seemed nervous when Weston had officially welcomed him. Nothing as blatant as a sweaty brow or dry lips or a case of the shakes. Dolores had spotted it too.

"He looks like a man who's doesn't

know whether he's been given the Black Spot or a bunch of flowers!" she had murmured as she passed. It had been several minutes before Weston had managed to remember which novel part of that reference had come from, and had decided that it was very apt.

His Security Chief ambled towards him in such a casually careless fashion that he instinctively braced himself for bad news.

"Trundlers have left Florence's house. Eight-up, and they are coming here."

"Sarek is coming here? Why the Hell can't Jim fight his wars in private?"

The Security Chief smiled wickedly. "It could be interesting. It depends on who he's fighting, and who he's recruited, and are you sure it's Jim doing the fighting?"

"Do you know something that I don't, and should?"

"Me?" The smile grew worse. "I always cry at weddings. Did you know that Stonn got married? His new wife's name is T'Prilia. I think that they're going to be here for a long time," she added cryptically as she idled away.

Weston gritted his teeth and made himself an absolute promise that, when all the fun was over and the Enterprise and the Vulcan Ambassador had left, and things had returned to a semblance of order, then he was going to kick the butt of his Security Chief very hard; provided, of course, that he could get within kicking range.

Stonn? Wasn't he married to T'Pring? Eight? Did she say eight??

Weston made it a point to be on

hand when his transient problems arrived so that he could assess the moods of the combatants. Sarek was impressively calm and showed no signs of the barely controlled volatility that had been so startling to the Security teams. (You can't put down that he stomped up to the door. Vulcan Ambassadors do not stomp. This one did.) Amanda was the epitome of graciousness and Spock was simply Spock, while Kirk showed all the symptoms of being in a decidedly Kirkian humour; he was simply bubbling with glee. The McCoys were radiating a sort of smug medical satisfaction and Florence was positively skittish, which at her age verged on the ridiculous.

In the middle of the adults was a pocket-sized edition of a Vulcan who looked about him with wide, innocent eyes and who stayed very close to Spock. Weston noted that nobody introduced him and, having lingered for longer than his hostal duties required, he decided to cut his losses and excused himself. Florence's broad parting wink sent him on his disturbed way. He was deep in conversation with one of the resident Cygnian teachers when his wife pounced.

"Come here," she whispered fiercely, tugging at his arm.

The Cygnian left him to it, the fluttering of his feathers indicating deep amusement.

"What did you do that for? You've just ruined my reputation with him."

"Ha!" retorted his wife, consigning his reputation to the dust. "Look!"

Weston glanced casually in the direction indicated, then did a double take. Solen and Sarek were standing talking; rather, Sarek was talking, quietly and without apparent heat, and Solen was attempting to interrupt, and failing.

As the Westons watched Solen managed to utter a few words, which were instantly rebutted by Sarek, and with interest. He was in full flow and unstoppable and Solen did not like what he was hearing. Finally Sarek dismissed Solen who bowed, and left the Ball.

Dol tucked her arm through her husband's and squeezed, which did interesting things to his blood pressure. "Funny," she said. "I'd always pegged Solen as being so controlled and remote. Compared to Sarek he's like a kid wearing his Daddy's best bib and tucker. I had an instructor in Basic Physics who could do that. Never raised his voice. Never swore. His tongue was regarded as a lethal weapon. He could lift sections of hide with the precision of a master surgeon using just a few ordinary words. He claimed he could inflect the word 'Sir' with 62 different and recognisable meanings. I'm glad that Sarek isn't mad at me. You got any ideas what's going on?"

"Why should I know what's going on? I'm just the fool in charge here. With any luck, once the Enterprise goes away it will all settle down again."

"Poo. Boring! You're getting old," said his wife, and left him before he could reply to the assertion. Weston added her to his kicking list, but watched her go. The dress that she was wearing was a honey. Uhura had real competition tonight, and Dolores was all his!

Jerry tried to forget about the war as it didn't look as if it was going to happen, and concentrated on making sure that there were no upsets at the Ball.

It was some time later and he was engrossed in talking to Spock about the completion of the repairs to the Enterprise, having quite forgotten about the events of Christmas, when they were

brought to his mind again. Spock knew that the warmth leaning trustingly against his left leg was the obvious reason for the extra few millimetres on Jerry Weston's smile and Spock, acknowledging the presence, said, "Please allow me to make you known. Captain Jerry Weston, Port Admiral of the Starfleet Academy Avalon, I introduce Starek, he who is my brother".

Spock didn't bother to control the flicker of amusement as Jerry guessed Starek's age and subtracted it from both Spock's (which he knew) and Amanda's (which he guessed at), the resulting figure causing some instantaneously wild conjecture. The situation was one that Amanda had foreseen and which she anticipated with some eagerness. One simply couldn't ask, but who couldn't help but wonder?

"I assume you have a question, Starek?"

"I have many questions, Spock," confirmed the boy, looking up at his big brother, "but I will limit myself to the ones of immediate interest. There is a Human talking to Father and Aunt Florence."

Weston mouthed, "Aunt Florence?" to McCoy, who'd ambled up to join them. He smiled politely and shrugged. Spock looked around, then said in a utterly bland tone, "That is Montgomery Scott. He is the Chief Engineer of the Enterprise."

"I supposed that it was. What language is he speaking?"

McCoy peered round a bunch of Tellerites to get a clear view of Scott and choked down his amusement. Even the most casual observer would have noted the list that Scott had developed (9.3 degrees from vertical) and the fact that

the Engineer's arms were apparently doing a great deal of the talking.

"Looks like Dol's scheme didn't work," commented Weston.

He was instantly the focus of three intrigued gazes, two roughly level with his, the other lancing up from about belt level.

"She appointed some Tarl to Engineer-sit. To try to keep him out of trouble." He indicated the luckless Tarl. They stood in a self-conscious curve a little way from the trio, obviously wishing that they were somewhere, anywhere, else, and yet still not deserting their task even when faced with the possibility of an insulted ambassador and - a worst prospect - an insulted teacher.

"We've been trying for years," said Spock quietly. "Mr Scott is the model of efficiency and decorum when aboard the Enterprise."

"But he kinda cuts loose on shore leaves," completed McCoy.

"Expecting him to 'keep out of trouble' is a waste of time. One can only apply damage limitations procedures."

"And prayer."

Weston's attention was now being dragged three ways. The situation with the Vulcan Ambassador was tricky, the almost inexplicable production of a much-too-young minor as his son was intriguing, and the apparent harmony between Spock and McCoy was... fascinating.

"----!" he said.

"What language is he speaking?" repeated Starek, not the least diverted by the double act.

"Based on the normal pattern of shore leaves he will be speaking a dialect of English known as Scottish. This is not so named because his name is Scott but because it is spoken by those peoples who originate from a part of Terra designated as Scotland."

"I had some difficulty understanding him."

"That is normal."

"He is engaged in trying to persuade Father and Aunt Florence to join him in building something." Starek clearly wanted an explanation.

"Was a type of device specified?"

"That is what I think I did not understand. I thought that he said, 'A Four-Dimensional Holographic Christmas Tree'."

"You understood. That has been a project under discussion for several years."

Florence offered Sarek a glass of fruit juice.

"Thank you. I have longed for someone to take Solen down a peg or two. He does have the unfortunate talent of annoying people."

Sarek accepted the glass. "A peg or two?"

"Now don't try to tell me you don't know what I mean."

"I merely asked him why he had chosen to attend this function when he had not attend any previous functions since being posted here."

"Mr Ambassador! I thought it was ye, surr."

The loud hail had Sarek swinging round in reaction and he recognised the man instantly, despite his slightly increased waistline and facial hair.

"Mr Scott."

"Am Ah intruding, Sair?"

Sarek's gaze flickered around the group surrounding the gloriously inebriated Engineer. The Tarl looked scared and very young. Their uniforms proclaimed them as engineers and doctors, and Sarek arrived at the very logical conclusion that they had been given the task of attempting to contain the Engineer's more unrestrained flights of fancy. They had obviously not expected these to include yelling hello at Vulcan diplomats.

"Not at all. May I introduce Doctor Florence Rood. I understand from my son that you wished to meet with her?"

Florence, half sheltered behind Sarek, peeped out at the audacious Human and was rewarded by having her hand captured and reverently kissed. "Madam. Ah have lang been an admirer of yours."

"That's very kind of you to say so," said Florence trying, genteelly, to free her hand, and failing.

"Ach naw," pronounced Scott indistinctly. "Yon work on the cold start save our skins. All of us!" Scott's free arm waved and the Tarl leaped smartly out of danger. "Saved the Enterprise too," he confided. The alcohol-laden air wafted gently about Florence. She hoped that there were no naked flames nearby. The Human was patently flammable.

"I'm glad that my efforts were of some use."

Scott frowned then said, "Ah jist remembered. Spock was trying tae meet wi' ye. Did he dae it?"

Suddenly guessing the identity of the drunk Florence had to bite the inside of her cheeks but managed a fairly steady, "Yes, thank you."

"Ah'm glad. Awfully clever man, thon laddie. Knows everything."

Florence, intrigued as to how Spock managed a working relationship with this Human, said, "I entirely agree."

"Ah jist wish that Ah could get him tae take an interest in ma' Christmas tree," said Scott mournfully. "Ah'm cairtain thot he could make it work."

Florence didn't attempt to resist. "What Christmas tree?"

Scott brightened dramatically. "Ah'm trying tae build a Holographic Four-Dimensional Christmas Tree. But Ah no' can make it work."

"Would you like me to have a look at your diagrams?"

"Would ye?" Scott released her hand and started to scramble inside his sporran. Florence choked slightly and looked away. Unfortunately she looked at Sarek, whose eyebrows had achieved a near vertical inclination, whether at Scott's actions or her own she couldn't tell, but she choked again, wishing for a small portion of Vulcan control.

Scott finally found the correct cassette and handed it over. "Ah've been working on this idea, on and off, for years. Got t'idea from watching the Tholians. Spock said that Ah was working in the correct direction but..." Scott shrugged.

"I'm sure that it'll be very interesting," said Florence sincerely.

"Aye. Well... Ah'll be taking ma' leave of ye." And kissing Florence's hand again, and waving a vacant farewell at Sarek, he ambled amiably away towards the bar, trailing his unfortunate Tarl behind him.

Florence turned the cassette over and over. "How does it feel to come second to a Holographic Four-Dimensional Christmas Tree, Mr Ambassador?" she teased.

Sarek regarded part of the ceiling. "My limited knowledge of such behaviour leads me to infer that Mr Scott's judgement was somewhat impaired."

"He is stiffer than a caber," she agreed. "I wonder who sicced those poor Tarl on him?"

"Whoever it was underestimated his capacity by several litres," was the prompt reply.

"And his ability to ignore convention when full. Still, I'm glad. Spock mentioned this project to me. It sounds very interesting."

Sarek turned a long-suffering eye downwards from the ceiling and stared at Florence.

"Honest, Sarek. Didn't you ever read Scott and Spock's paper on the mechanics of the dimensional interphases in the Tholian sectors of space, and how the Tholians manipulated their forcefields to avoid or negate them?"

"I have not," said Sarek a trifle stiffly.

"No matter. You can access copies from the house. They have some very

leading ideas on how to build a controller for the phase-shift. The trouble is that Scott is locked into building the thing to make his hologram work and Spock can't shift him away from that. Spock is convinced that the controller is a possibility and that it could be used to protect a full-sized ship. He's right. Something has to be done, and soon. The situation is totally silly. Those inter-phase holes are a terrible nuisance and you can't keep on giving the crew Klingon nerve gas to drink."

"Klingon? I am not familiar with this procedure."

"I dare say not. It's not exactly the sort of treatment that your average medical man would recommend. There again, Leonard is hardly average. It's all in the Enterprise Logs. Would you like have a look?" She held up the cassette and waved it. "Purely from a scientific point of curiosity, of course."

"I have no access to facilities."

"I have. We can use the Academy Labs. They're bound to have all the equipment that we need."

McCoy, who had drifted closer to the action after listening to Sarek's questions, clutched his glass tightly and hurried off to find Jim and Spock.

"Spock, you've got to do something!" he interrupted a quiet discussion dramatically.

"What precisely would you like me to do, Leonard?" asked Spock politely.

"You've got to do something about Florence and your father!" hissed McCoy.

Spock stood silently for several moments as he tried to absorb the reasoning behind McCoy's statement. Jim

took the opportunity to remove the glass from McCoy's hand, sniff the contents suspiciously and then fish out the sprig of greenery floating in it.

"It could be a mint julep, but this isn't mint."

"Shut up, Jim. This is serious. You've got to do something!"

"If you were a trifle more specific in your request?"

"Scotty has given Florence the plans for the Holographic Four-Dimensional Christmas Tree!"

"I assumed that. Is this is cause for alarm?" Spock asked Jim, who shrugged as he replied dismissively.

"If he'd kissed her, maybe."

"He did," said McCoy.

"Pardon?" said Kirk.

"He kissed her," repeated McCoy "Twice."

"Oh dear! All of a sudden I don't feel too well."

Spock looked around, saw his father and Florence talking to a group of diplomats, and raised his hand. Florence waved back.

"She does not seem overly disturbed by the experience."

"She has persuaded your father to help her build it!"

"The Holographic Four-Dimensional Christmas Tree?" put in Kirk surprised.

"Yes!"

Remembering their discussion of aspects of Tholian space inter-phasing Spock knew why Florence had seemingly persuaded Sarek into the strange venture. The opportunity it supplied was unique. "Why should I attempt to prevent my father building a Holographic Four-Dimensional Christmas Tree if he wishes to do so?"

McCoy gaped at him then squeaked out, "What?"

Spock dutifully rephrased his question. "Why should I interfere with my father's decision to construct this artifact?"

"Because it doesn't make sense," ground out McCoy.

Spock tilted his head slightly to one side and said innocently, "Why does something have to 'make sense' in order for it to be logical?"

"You! You!"

Wearing his very best pixie look Spock asked casually, "I am not familiar with that term. What is a You-You, Jim?"

"Damn-it Spock. I'm trying to be serious!"

"Are you, Leonard?" Spock appeared to be fascinated by the idea.

"Stop being obtuse when I'm being illogical!" bellowed McCoy.

That, and Kirk's whoop of laughter, turned several heads. The trio were joined by Jo and another woman, a serenely beautiful blonde. McCoy addressed them.

"I wondered when you two would show up."

Jim watched as Bones kissed a cheerful hello to his daughter and to the woman he'd been meeting on a regular basis since they had first met at the Christmas Day Ball.

"Hello, Sarah. Do you know each other?"

Sarah laughed, kissed him and said, "Of course we do. Very well indeed, don't we, Plum?"

"Plum?" asked Jim, glancing at Spock, whose eyes had narrowed slightly.

"It was a long time ago," explained Leonard McCoy.

"Before I was born," chipped in Jo. "Wasn't it, Mom?"

All three McCoys rocked with laughter as comprehension bloomed on Jim Kirk's face, together with a fiery blush.

Starek sat on the raised edge of the indoor pool and watched the parade of lifeforms about him. He'd never seen so many different peoples in all of his short life, although he'd read about most on the computers at The Refuge. They all seemed to tolerate each other so effortlessly, which was in direct conflict with the statements that Stonn and T'Pring had often made. It was yet another piece of evidence in the growing list which was leading him inexorably to the conclusion that the teachings of Stonn and T'Pring were fatally flawed. He realised that Amanda had joined him and was sitting on the wall a little way from him.

"Are you all right? Do you want to remain? Or shall I take you back to Florence's house?"

"I would prefer to remain, if you

will allow it? This is so interesting."

"Didn't T'Pring and Stonn ever take you to parties at the Academy?"

"They never went to any. They said that they were an illogical waste of time and energy."

"What is your opinion?" asked Amanda.

"There is a purpose for the gathering, and all here seem to share it. It seems to be that the people here wish to learn about one another. This would make the gathering an expression of IDIC. Is that correct?"

"That's one way of looking at it. A very good way." Amanda infused genuine approval into her voice.

The whoops of laughter drew their attention.

"Looks like the children are at it again," commented Amanda to Starek.

"Some rivalry is inevitable in peer groups, or between siblings," responded Starek. "Who is the lady who is with Jim and Leonard and Jo?"

"That is Sarah. She is Jo's mother. She lives on Earth and has come here to visit Jo and Leonard. She is no longer married to Leonard; their parting was amicable."

The detail was the normal background that any introduction on Vulcan came with. It was a social necessity to know precisely who was related to whom and in what degree, and Starek needed all the practise he could get. It would not be easy on Vulcan for him, but Amanda knew that things would not be as they had been for Spock. Times had changed and so had people and

attitudes.

Starek sat in silence, as he had always done, and found that it was no longer sufficient. He wanted something more. He didn't know what, but there was something missing. He remembered Spock hugging him in the trundler, and Sarek gathering up Spock from the floor, and Jim Kirk picking him up and carrying him out of the bedroom, and across the hall Jo and her mother were standing arm in arm. There was something that he almost remembered.

Impulsively he stretched out his hand and placed it over Amanda's. "I am told that you are a teacher, Lady Amanda. If you would consent to teach me I would be a very diligent pupil."

Amanda swallowed sudden tears. "It would be my honour, and one day, perhaps, I may be able to teach you to call me Mother?"

"May I? Oh yes, please!"

Starek wasn't quite sure what happened next but he found himself wrapped in Amanda's arms, hugged close to her. It seemed perfectly right and proper that he should hug her back.

